New Media and Religious Conversion Out of Islam Among Celebrities in Indonesia

Budiawan[1]

Media and Cultural Studies Program, Universitas Gadjah Mada, Indonesia

Keywords

New media; religious conversion; celebrities; religious minorities

Abstract

In Muslim-majority Indonesia religious conversion to Islam among celebrities always makes it a piece of good news. Infotainment programs of most TV channels broadcast it as their prime news. However, the opposite direction, namely the religious conversion out of Islam to other religions, is hardly possible to broadcast in conventional media such as TV, newspaper, radio, etc. It is a very sensitive issue, which could cause a mass outcry. Yet, such a phenomenon is easily found in a new media platform, such as YouTube. This paper explores the netizens' responses to religious conversion out of Islam to Christianity among Indonesian celebrities. By scrutinizing this phenomenon, this paper aims to show to what extent new media provides a space for the religious minorities to speak for themselves. By closely reading their comments, this paper finds that in new media being a religious minority does not matter to represent themselves.

Introduction

In Muslim-majority Indonesia[2] religious conversion to Islam among celebrities always makes it good news. Infotainment programs of most TV channels broadcast it as their prime news.[3] The celebrities who have just converted to Islam are portrayed as the ones who have got *hidayah* (or "spiritually enlightened"), as it partly – and mainly -- could be seen in their ways of dressing and speaking. In terms of dressing, they show a change from "un-Islamic" to "Islamic" clothes. In terms of speaking, they perform a change from hardly using "Islamic"

terms to quite often inserting "Islamic" words in expressing their feeling and thoughts[4]. Such portrayal of the new adherents of Islam is seen as a part of the promotion of Islam as "superior/truthful" religion (*dakwah*), in the sense that it is a religion which has been able to transform the "messy, liberal and secular" life of the given celebrities – as it is publicly imaged -- into a "religious/pious" one.

However, there is hardly any – if not entirely none – news on TV about celebrities who have converted out of Islam to other religions, especially to Christianity. In predominantly

---

[1] *Corresponding* email ✉ budiawan4@ugm.ac.id
[2] According to the National Census of Population 2010, Muslims in Indonesia constitute 87.18 %, while Christians (Protestants and Roman Catholic altogether) comprises of 9.87 %. The rest is other religious minorities such as Buddhists, Hindus, and followers of Confucianism. The national census of the population is conducted every 10 years. Stating religious identity – one of six official religions -- in identity card or family card is a must to every citizen, the statistics of religious composition among the population can be monitored in every National Census of Population. See https://www.indonesia-

investments.com/culture/religion/item69 (accessed on May 6, 2019).
[3] In July 2019, the conversion of Deddy Corbuzier – a well-known host of one favourite talk show program – from Christianity to Islam, for instance, was on top news in the infotainment programs. Previously, the conversion to Islam of a well-known TV film actor Roger Danuarta was on top news as well.
[4] This kind of phenomenon is also found among the Muslims who have done "hijrah", in the sense of transforming their "ways of life" from "less Islamic" to "more Islamic" articulations. See the research report by Taufiqur Rahman, et.al. (2018).

Muslim Indonesia where there is a fear of Christianisation,[5] conversion out of Islam is condemned as *murtad* (apostate). It is difficult to imagine what would happen if there were any TV channels broadcasting news about a celebrity who has just converted out of Islam to Christianity. Most probably it would not only be the given celebrity who would be condemned and cursed by most of the Muslim audience. The TV channels themselves were likely protested and harshly criticized as taking a part in the spread of Christianisation. It can be a strong pressure to boycott the TV channels. In short, conversion out of Islam in Indonesia is completely a very sensitive issue,[6] which tends not to discuss it publicly.

Nonetheless, if one browses the Internet or new media platform such as YouTube, one can easily find testimonies of Indonesian celebrities having converted out of Islam to other religions, especially Christianity. One YouTube channel even reports that there have been twenty-five celebrities who have converted out of Islam to Christianity within the last few years.[7] What happened then? Not a few comments harshly condemn them. But, many more comments celebrate such conversion, welcome them as new fellow Christians, or argue that converting to other religions is the manifestation of religious freedom, which is a part of human rights.

One thing is apparent: all of these happen on the Internet. We have not heard any news about the violent on the celebrities who have converted out of Islam. Neither have we heard of any physical conflicts between those who raised mutually opposing comments.[8] This means that in new media religious minorities

(or the ones who identify themselves to be so) have the space to speak for themselves or to represent themselves. The question is: to what extent do they have the space to speak for themselves? Is this just up through defending the rights of these celebrities to convert to other religions, in case Christianity? or beyond? How do they express their thoughts on this very sensitive issue? How do they deal with those who condemn that religious conversion as something extremely sinful?

These questions prompt this paper to focus on the netizens' comments rather than on the testimonies of the celebrities who have just converted out of Islam to Christianity. Of all available channels in YouTube presenting testimonies of Indonesian celebrities who have converted out of Islam to Christianity, I deliberately selected only one, that is the one presenting the testimonies of well-known film actor Lukman Sardi. There are two reasons why I choose this channel. First, Lukman Sardi's conversion out of Islam to Christianity is the most controversial among the converted celebrities. The controversy partly lies on the fact that before he converted to Christianity, he was the actor who played the role as Ahmad Dahlan – the founder of Muhammadiyah, the second-largest Muslim organization in Indonesia, in the early twentieth century – in the film of "Sang Pencerah" (The Enlightener) (2010). Second, as the indicator of the controversy, this channel gains the largest views and comments.[9]

There are certainly various comments on Lukman Sardi's testimonies to convert to Christianity. Yet, it is not the concern of this paper to see the percentage of each kind of

---

[5] Popular books (or pamphlets) on "the threat of Christianisation" are easily found. The presence of Christian humanitarian aid organizations among the victims of natural disasters, for instance, is often suspected as a strategy of Christianisation. On such books see, for example, Bakhtiar et.al. (2010), Daimah (n.d.), Tanzania (2010), etc.

[6] To the Muslims conversion out of Islam is called *murtad*, "which is very sensitive among the Muslims.... and conversion out of Islam is a case which should be brought to the Islamic court, not civilian court... Those who have converted out of Islam should not be allowed to live and do not deserve any protection because their life has no longer a sense of destiny" (Zailia, 2015).

[7] See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oIX4ahgKn7Q (accessed on May 8, 2019).

[8] Unlike in Islamic state such as Pakistan and Iran, Indonesia does not have an anti-apostasy law, which means that the state cannot forbid religious conversion out of Islam. However, various forms of social punishment such as social isolation is common, and it is beyond the state's control.

[9] Until August 6, 2019, the channel presenting Lukman Sardi's testimonies gained 2.495.172 views and 4,826 comments. While the second largest is the one presenting the testimonies of actress Nafa Urbach, which had 2.173.091 views and 4.645 comments. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wUBkmneLn (accessed on August 6, 2019).

comment. The interest of this paper lies in the comments – regardless of the quantity – which can be categorized as the ones which tend to defend the rights of the given celebrity to do the religious conversion and/or welcome him as their new fellow Christian. By closely reading these kinds of comments this paper aims to scrutinize the limits of the space of the Christians (or those who can be identified as Christians) to speak for themselves, and/or the limits of the space of those who defend the right to do the religious conversion.

Before presenting and discussing the textual data, it is necessary to address the key concepts of this paper such as religious conversion, celebrities, new media, and religious minorities. Then I would like to present a brief account of the socio-historical contexts of Muslim – Christian relations in Indonesia. It is within such contexts the textual data would be discussed. Then I would like to present the textual data, followed by some discussion on them, and finally are some concluding remarks to show the limits of those who speak in defense of the rights to convert to other religions.

Literature Review

This section discusses the key concepts such as religious conversion, celebrities, new media, and religious minorities. Without claiming to get into the debates on these concepts, this section is aimed at presenting the working definitions of the concepts and how they would be applied in this article.

Religious conversion

The concept of conversion is not easy to define. Scientific disciplines such as psychology and sociology have been struggling with this problem. As noted by Naomi Kok (n.d., 5), one of the first persons to write about the conversion was Edwin Starbuck, who saw conversion mainly as the solution to a psychological crisis. The moment the individual converted, the crisis was resolved and a new self would appear.

While to Raymond Paloutzian, as cited by Naomi Kok (n.d., 8), conversion is defined as a more distinct process by which a person goes from believing, adhering to, and/or practicing one set of religious teachings or spiritual values to believing, adhering to, and/or practicing a different set. The transformative process in conversion may take variable amounts of time, ranging from a few moments to several years, but it is the distinctiveness of change that is its central identifying element.

That definition fits with the testimonies of the given film actor which I will present later. It fits because religious conversion, in that case, is rather an individual phenomenon than the result of social and political pressure or conditioning.

Celebrities

According to Michael Newbury, as cited by Kristina Gregory (2008, pp. 1-2), the term celebrity can be defined as "actors of a certain rank, performers who had reached the top rung of an insular profession". An insular profession is a profession that is detached and stands alone. In this case, an insular profession is one that stands apart from the rest of society. For a celebrity, their professions – often actors/actresses, musicians, and other high-profile careers – are ones that do seem detached from the rest of society as they are professions that are accessible to only a select few.

By such a definition, Kristina Gregory contends, celebrities can then be easily placed in the public eye by the media. When celebrities have something to offer the public, the public is interested in them. There exists a symbiotic relationship between celebrities and the media. The media can make a celebrity, and in turn, celebrities give the media something about which to report. If the media does not believe that someone is newsworthy, the media will not choose to report on that person (Gregory, 2008, pp. 3-6).

So, what turns a famous person into a celebrity? The answer seems to be the narrative. As Neal Gabler argues, the main reason we want to read about certain individuals in the tabloids, or we want to watch television reports about them, is that we are interested in their stories (Gabler, n.d., p. 4). Who is meant by "we" is none other than fans – an audience who appreciate the narrative and admire its star; for, in the end, a celebrity without someone to consume it is like a movie without someone to watch it. Or if a celebrity story is generated and there is no one to hear or see it, it does not make a sound (Gabler, n.d., pp. 10).

The film actor whose religious conversion is the concern of this paper fits with "the standard" definition of a celebrity. He has starred several of films, and has achieved fame in the eyes of the public. It means that every story of his life would likely attract public interest.

New media

The term "new media" will, in general, refer to those digital media, which are interactive, incorporate two-way communication and involve some form of computing as opposed to "old media" such as telephone, radio, and TV. These older media, which in their incarnation did not require computer technology, now in their present configuration make use of computer technology as do so many other technologies. Many "new media" emerged by combining an older medium with computer chips and a hard drive. Some describe "new media" as the ability to combine text, audio, digital video, interactive multimedia, virtual reality, the Web, email, chat, the cell phone, and any source of information accessible by one's personal computer. Thus new media is nothing but the amalgamation of all types of media into one new form. All of the conceptions, ideas, and theories of the original media are embedded into the new form (Mitra, 2011, p. 2).

The new media permit more participation of its users who are no longer just passive recipients of information but are also active producers of content and information. In this case, YouTube can be categorized as a new media as it fits with that definition, not only in terms of its combination of platforms but also in terms of its characteristics, which are interactive.

Religious minorities

'Minority' as a concept has proven to be difficult to define. Even when, in 1992, the United Nations adopted the 'Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities', and even though several rights were guaranteed to minorities and to persons belonging to these minorities, a clear definition of 'minority' was never given. Similarly, a definition is not given in the *Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities* adopted in 1995 by the Council of Europe (de Angelo & Toleno, 2017, p. 143).

Generally, a minority is defined as such when its members constitute a small group of people who, on the level of culture, ethnicity, religion, language, etc., share the awareness of differentiating themselves from the majority of population of the state in which they live, and who express, implicitly or explicitly, the desire to preserve their distinctive traits. Compliance with the criteria of numerical inferiority and the possession of specific characteristics is not sufficient to attribute minority status to a community of individuals. To acquire minority status, this community must hold a non-dominant position (de Angelo & Toleno, 2017, p. 146).

Such a notion of minority fits with the conditions of the Christians as a part of the religious minorities in Indonesia. At the national level, in all aspects of life, they are marginal, in the sense of non-dominant position. It is their condition of being marginal that has conditioned them to be "too reserved".

Socio-Historical contexts of Muslim – Christians relations in Indonesia

An Indonesian scholar Mujiburrahman (2006) describes Muslims–Christian relations in Indonesia's New Order (1966 – 1998) and beyond as mutually "feeling threatened". Among the Muslims, the Christian threat has been called "Kristenisasi" (Christianisation). In the Muslim discourse, Christianisation meant unfair and aggressive efforts to convert Muslims to Christianity such as by offering money, food, education and health care to the poor Muslims; building a church in a Muslim majority area; encouraging Christians to marry Muslim partners in order to convert the latter; inviting Muslims to participate in Christmas celebration under the pretext of religious tolerance, and; teaching Christianity to Muslim students in Christian schools. In the Muslim discourse, Christianisation could also mean a political conspiracy of the Christians with other enemies of Islam, particularly the secularists, inside and outside the country, to weaken the Islamic groups culturally, politically, and economically. Christianisation was therefore described as a 'new style of crusade', 'religious expansionism', 'foreign intervention', 'arrogance of cultural superiority' inherited from the West, and 'intolerant to Muslim feelings' (Mujiburrahman, 2006, pp. 299-300).

To protect the Islamic community from the perceived threat of Christianisation, the Muslim leaders developed exclusive interpretations of religious doctrines, such as a total rejection of freedom to convert from Islam by reaffirming the classic Islamic doctrine on apostasy (an apostate could be killed,[10] though it was noted that it could not be applied in a non-Islamic state like Indonesia); prohibiting Muslims from participating in Christmas celebration by emphasizing that the Christian doctrine of the Trinity could endanger Muslim monotheistic belief (Mujiburrahman, 2006, p. 300).

The Christians, on the other hand, denied the existence of what the Muslims called Christianisation efforts. To them, what they have done is perceived as the manifestation of religious freedom: the freedom to build churches in all regions of Indonesia, the freedom to preach religion to anybody, the freedom to change religion, the freedom to cooperate with co-religionists outside the country (that is, to receive foreign aid), the freedom to participate in religious celebrations of another religion, the freedom to follow religious teachings without any pressure from the state; and the freedom to teach Christianity to all students in Christian schools, as long as they or their parents agreed. Christians used two important arguments to support their understanding of religious freedom, namely nationalism and human rights. Nationalism for them meant that all citizens are equal before the state on the basis that all of them shared the same nationality. Other allegiances such as religion, race, geographic origin, should be submitted to nationality. In this sense, nationalism is in line with individual human rights, particularly the right to religious freedom (Mujiburrahman, 2006, pp. 300-301).

After the fall of Suharto, the Muslim discourse on Christianisation continued influencing Muslim-Christian relations. Whereas the Muslims felt insecure and threatened by Christianisation, the Christians were afraid of the threat of an Islamic state. For the Christians, to live under an Islamic state in which the shari'a law is implemented would mean that they would be turned into second-class citizens. As a religious minority, Christians prefer the secular political view of the separation of religion and state (Mujiburrahman, 2006, p. 303).

Historically, the negative interconnection between Muslims and Christians in Indonesia has started since their first encounter with reciprocal threat perception becomes the dominant explanation. The negative perception between these two communities turned into

---

[10] See footnote number 6.

worship restriction when Indonesia experienced political system transition into a more democratic country in the late 1990s. Ironically, the freedom of union, speech, and expression coupled with the implementation of decentralization has become the central issue to explain such a problem. The creation of Islamic social movements with radical ideology such as Front Pembela Islam (Islamic Defender Front) (FPI), Forum Umat Islam (Forum of Islamic Adherents) (FUI), Aliansi Gerakan Anti Pemurtadan (Alliance of Anti-Apostate Movement) (AGAP) and Gerakan Islam Reformis (Islamic Reformist Movement) (GARIS) on one hand, and Christianisation program conducted by Pentecostalism and charismatic church denominations, on the other hand, has provoked the religious intolerance between the two communities (Damayanti, 2018, p. 16).

It is within such context that the textual data of the netizens' comments on Lukman Sardi's testimonies to convert to Christianity would be placed. However, it is necessary to present the bio-sketch of the film actor Lukman Sardi and his testimonies to convert to Christianity first.

A brief account of Lukman Sardi's career in film and his testimonies to convert to Christianity

Born on July 14, 1971, in Jakarta, Lukman Sardi is a son of the legendary violinist Idris Sardi. He began his career as a film actor in 1980s when he played in *Anak-anak Tak Beribu* (Children without mother) (1980). Previously he had starred in *Kembang-kembang Plastik* (Plastic flowers) (1977) and *Pengemis dan tukang becak* (Beggars and pedicab drivers) (1978). But he only had a minor role.

Despite being a film actor since he was a child, he turned to be famous just in the early 2000s, when he starred in films more intensively. One of the films in which he played as the leading role is *Sang Pencerah* (The Enlightener) (2010), upon which he won the award as the best male leading role in the

Bandung Film Festival in 2011. *Sang Pencerah* is a film about the biography of Ahmad Dahlan, the founding father of the second-largest Muslim organization, the Muhammadiyah, in the early twentieth century. As I have mentioned above, when the public knew that Lukman Sardi had converted to Christianity, they saw it as an irony, as "people do confuse the person with the part [he played]" (Gabler, n.d., p. 9).

Another successful film in which Sardi played a supporting role is the movie *Soekarno* (2013), where he won as best supporting actor. *Soekarno* is a film about the life story of young Sukarno – the founding father and first president of the Republic of Indonesia – until the proclamation of Independence in 1945. Until 2016 he had starred in more than sixty films, either he played as the supporting role or leading one. Besides the movie, he had starred in three TV series, and he had directed three films, one of which he was awarded as the best director in the Indonesian Box Movies Awards for the film *Di Balik 98* (2015). *Di Balik 98* is a film about the other side of the reform movement which had ended the thirty-two-year rule of Suharto in May 1998.

Due to such a long and successful career in the Indonesian film industry, there is no doubt that Lukman Sardi is one of the famous film actors in Indonesia. Because of his fame whatever he says and does would surely attract the public interest. That is why he could be categorized as a celebrity.

As a consequence of being a celebrity, Lukman Sardi – just as other celebrities – had hardly any privacy in his personal life. His testimony about his conversion out of Islam to Christianity in the anniversary of Indonesian Bethel Church "Ecclesia" in May 2015 made a big controversy. Surely it was after his testimony was uploaded on YouTube on May 24, 2015. Before discussing how the controversy is like, it is necessary to present a brief account of his testimony about his conversion to Christianity. In a 15 minutes 12 seconds video, Lukman Sardi gave his testimony about his conversion to

Christianity. He told that although he married a Christian woman, his decision to convert to Christianity did not come before or just after he got married. He said that he is a type of man who cannot be forced, and his wife never forced him to convert to Christianity.

His decision to convert to Christianity came about through a sort of "miracle". It was the time when his wife, Pricillia Pullunggono, was about to give birth to their first child in December 2009. At that moment they were in a financial crisis, as Sardi had not received the money of the working contract he had signed in. He contacted the producer of the film in which he starred, but he did not receive any response. Whereas he had been in the hospital to accompany his wife who was about to give birth. He told that it was his wife who was a little worried about the money to pay for the hospital. But Sardi kept calm. He prayed in his way. All of sudden he received a message through SMS (short message service) from the producer telling that the money had been transferred.

In his testimony, Sardi told that it was the moment when he believed in the grace of God. It was the moment that turned him to be a believer of Jesus Christ. He said that running life with thankfulness would lead to happiness, not just feel thankful when happiness comes. He told that he had experienced a lot of things in his life, but he was convinced that he would not get into calamity as he believed in the presence of Jesus Christ.

To end his testimony Sardi even said that it was not impossible one day he turned to be a pastor, indicating that he had seriously and completely converted to Christianity. The congregates applauded him after he finished giving his testimony.

Below is a discussion of the comments of the netizens on that video.

Netizens' comments: from condemning to celebriting Lukman Sardi's conversion to Christianity

In general, the whole netizens' comments can be identified within the spectrum of extreme responses ranging from harshly condemning Lukman Sardi's conversion to Christianity as an unforgivable sin to the ones supporting his conversion to Christianity as a truthful choice. Between the two extremes is the comment on religious conversion as a form of religious freedom, which is a part of human rights; or, religion is within the private domain so that anybody cannot intervene it.

However, the comments that religion is within the private domain of religious conversion as a form of religious freedom are countered by those who keep the religious conviction that it is the obligation of every Muslim to remind their fellow Muslims to keep their faith in Islam. When a Muslim does not do this obligation, he or she takes a part in the sinful deed. This means that reminding a fellow Muslim to keep his/her faith in Islam is one way of throwing away one's sense of being sinful. Surely a great disappointment is there, and it is expressed by condemning Lukman Sardi's conversion to Christianity as an apostate, as it is said by a netizen called Heru 999 as follows:

> "Amit2...#murtad *dosa yg ga akan pernah di ampuni..kekal abadi di neraka paling bawah*"

> (Oh my God „,being an apostate is unforgivable sin…[he] will be sunk into the bottom of the hell forever).

A similar comment is written by a netizen called Rianda Jamet:

> "mau murtad atau tidak itu urusan loe. tp yg jelas loe guoblog Luk. pesan gw... ntr loe mati pasti nyesel di akhirat...kasihan deh loe..."

> (being an apostate or not is indeed your business. but one thing is clear: you are stupid Luk[man Sardi]. my message is ....next when you die and go to the afterlife, you will feel regretful ...what a pity on you ....)

While another netizen called Syamsul Bahri criticized the Christian church as

deceitful in Christianising other people since the church ..."*memberikan AGAMA kepada ORANG YANG sudah PUNYA AGAMA*" (teaching religion to the people who have embraced another religion [namely, Islam]).

On the other side there are more comments supporting the idea that religion is within the private domain and religious conversion is a personal choice or freedom, as it is written by a netizen called Pangkalan Jati:

"*Agama urusan pribadi masing2, ga usa di ributin*"

(religion is a private business of each person, it is no need for a fuss).

A similar but a little bit questioning comment on those who condemn Lukman Sardi's conversion to Christianity is written by a netizen called Lucia Walangitan:

"*Hmmmm buat apa kita mencela atau memusuhi orang yang berpindah keyakinan atau menganut agama lain??? Apa yang kita dapat dari situ??? Tidak ada. Keyakinan seseorang tidak bisa di paksakan, yang terpenting adalah saling menghargai, menghormati dan juga mengasihi satu dengan yang lain nya. Damai itu indaaaah sekali lhoooo :-)*"

(Hmmmmm...what for do we blame or make a hostile to other people who have converted to or embraced other religions? What do we get [from that blame]? Nothing. One's belief cannot be forced...the most important thing is that we have to appreciate, respect and love one and another. Peace is really beautiful).

A netizen called Rapha el agrees with the comment above by saying that:

"*Aku punya sepupu dia Islam Saya Katolik, tapi saya masih anggap dia sebagai keluarga*"

(I have a cousin who is a Muslim, while I am a Roman Catholic and I remain to regard him as my relative).

One-step "further" from those comments are the ones welcoming Lukman Sardi as a new fellow Christian, such as the comment by a netizen called Marlise Hutajulu,

"*success buat mas lukman sardi Tuhan jesus memberkati*"

([I] wish you success to brother Lukman Sardi, may Jesus the Lord bless upon you).

While a prayer for Lukman Sardi is written by a netizen called benzuxess 2010,

"*Puji TUHAN, sudah memilih YESUS sbg JURU SELAMAT. Semoga bertahan dalam iman dengan pertolongan ROH KUDUS*".

(Thank God, [he] has accepted Jesus as the Savior. Hopefully, he keeps this faith with the help of the Holy Spirit).

While some other comments do not only welcome Lukman Sardi as a new fellow Christian, but emphasizing that his conversion to Christianity is a form of transformation from the darkness to the Light of Jesus Christ, as is written by a netizen called Tammar Vega:

"*mantap oom Lukman.. anda telah berpindah dr gelap kp terangNya. Tuhan mbkti*"

(be steady uncle Lukman ...you have transformed from the darkness to His bright. May God Bless upon you).

A similar comment is said by a netizen called Yonatan Karet,

"*puji tuhan,dia tahu kebenaran*"

(Thank God, he knows the truth).

While a netizen called Wani Tenan to comment a little bit "jokingly" discrediting the most sacred place for Muslims, namely the Kaaba,

"*Bersyukurlah wis ndak nyembah watu item lagi*"

(Thank God, [he] no longer worships the black stone).

It seems that what is meant by "the black stone" here is the Kaaba, namely the Meteor Stone in Mecca which is placed as the Qibla of the prayer of every Muslim around the world.

It is through such comments that netizens who can likely be identified as Christians confidently articulate their belief. Even one netizen "jokingly" insults the most sacred place for Muslims. This is only possible in the new media, as on the Net everyone could be anyone and no one at once (Bell, 2001, Ch. 6).

Netizens could have multiple identities, or be anonymous. In their anonymity, netizens could speak almost without any self-censorship. Interestingly that the comment that can be identified as a sort of insult did not attract any response from other netizens who identify themselves as Muslims. Perhaps because it is not a blunt insult, the netizen used the word "black stone" instead of Kaaba.

New Media: Religious conversion out of Islam and the perceived threat of Christianisation

From the data presented above, despite the comments that religious conversion is a personal choice as a form of religious freedom, to both groups of a netizen who can be identified as Muslims on one hand and Christians on the other, it is not a private matter. Moreover, it is a religious conversion done by a celebrity, who is assumed to influence to the public. To the Muslims, one Muslim converts out of Islam to other religions means less to the statistical aggregate of the Muslims. To the Christians, one Muslim converts to Christianity means that the statistical aggregate of the Christians gets more adherents. It means that religious conversion is a matter of the politics of a number of the two mutually competing religious groups. As politics of number can likely be related to power relations, change in number could cause the shift of the constellation of power.[11]

As I have mentioned before, Muslim – Christian relations in Indonesia can be described as mutually feeling threatened. In the data presented above this can be seen in the comment which criticizes Church as deceitful in Christianising other people, namely teaching religion to the people who have already embraced a religion, in this case, Islam. In the case of Lukman Sardi, this comment is certainly wrong, since he converted to Christianity voluntarily. Nobody persuades, let alone forces,

him to convert to Christianity. This voluntary conversion also happens to other celebrities, both those who convert out of Islam to other religions, especially Christianity and those who convert to Islam (becoming *mualaf*). Since there is no law dealing with religious conversion, there is no legal punishment on those who have done the religious conversion. It is within this context the so-called "religious freedom" (in a minimum sense) is guaranteed by the state – one thing which is opposed by a group of Islamists who have proposed the legal draft of the Anti-Apostasy Act, like in Malaysia. By this statement, I do not mean to say that there should be a law dealing with religious conversion.

It is obvious that since it is a perceived threat of Christianisation, converting out of Islam to Christianity is a completely sensitive issue. To many Muslims, it is a really bad news, while it is a piece of good news to Christians. However, to Christians, it is good news which does not need to publicize in order not to attract the possible outcry of the Muslims. Yet, in new media, it is good news which they celebrate. What makes it possible?

Howard Rheingold (as cited in Bell, 2001, p. 98) contends that "in cyberspace, we do everything people do when they get together, but we do it with words on computer screens, leaving our bodies behind"; and life on the screen, Sherry Turkle (2001, p. 237) contends, "permits us to project ourselves into our dramas", in which "the self is no longer simply playing different roles in different settings at different times". In other words, "Internet gives us a reservoir of choices...and it is the ideal site to 'play' with our identities... [it] offers possibilities to substantially re-imagine the very notion of community" (Bell, 2001, p. 97).

Due to such a "reservoir of choices and possibilities", McKeena, et.al. (as cited in Tyler, 2002, p. 197) argue that "rather than turning to the Internet as a way of hiding from real life, those who are socially anxious ... turn to the

---

[11] On how religion affects the political constellation, see Mandaville (2008).

Internet as a means of forming close and meaningful relationships with others in a non-threatening environment". It is because, McKeena, et.al. (as cited in Tyler, 2002, p. 197) continues, "the Internet may help people to compensate for weaknesses in the short term.... [It] may facilitate the creation of relationships among the anxious... because of their lack of comfort with interpersonal situations, but that emerge to look very much like other real-world relationships".

As a part of religious minorities in Indonesia, Christians might be called those "who are socially anxious". It is apparent every time they are facing such news on church demolitions, the shutting down of churches, and the dismissal of Christian gatherings in some parts of the country. Yet, they cannot articulate their protests publicly, although legally – as parts of the Indonesian citizens – they deserve to. Therefore it is in new media they can express their concern, as they find it "a non-threatening environment". However, it is just "compensation in the short-term". It is just "a temporary haven" since just they appear in the offline space, they have already been conditioned to be "too reserved".

Conclusion

Unlike in conventional media such as TV, radio, newspaper, etc., in new media news about religious conversion out of Islam to Christianity among Indonesian celebrities have enough space. Even netizens can make it into hot (and cruel) debates, in which each group, including the ones who can be identified as belonging to the religious minorities, without any hesitance is confident to articulate what is in their mind. It is in new media that they can represent themselves – they cannot only defend what they perceive as the personal right to convert to other religion, but they can also express and demonstrate their religious faith as a way of articulating their politics of identity before other netizens who can be identified as Muslims. Such confidence is no surprise, as they

are supported by more netizens who can be identified as Christians as well.

Seeing that conversion to Christianity is a good news to Christians, it can be assumed that such news is likely viewed and commented by more Christians than Muslims. It means that netizens who identify themselves as Christians feel that they are a part of the majority, unlike in the offline space. Due to such feeling, they are confident to perform themselves. However, it only happens on the Internet, and it lasts temporarily. How it has affected their performance in the offline space could be a further research agenda.

References

Bakhtiar, Nurman Agus & Murisal (2010), *Ranah Minang di Tengah Cengkeraman Kristenisasi* [The Land of Minang in the Grip of Christianization], Yogyakarta: Bumi Aksara.

Bell, David (2001), *An Introduction to Cybercultures,* London & New York: Routledge.

Daimah, Lajnah (n.d.), *Awas Kristenisasi di Seputar Anda* [Beware! Christianization is Around You], Yogyakarta; At-Tuqa.

Damayanti, Angel (2018), Muslim-Christian Relationships in Indonesian Reform Era Within the Framework of Democracy: Case Study of Bandung, Bekasi, and Bogor (1998 – 2015), *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research*, Vol. 129, pp. 9 – 18.

Gabler, Neal (n.d.), *Toward a New Definition of Celebrity*, Norman Lear Center, Annenberg School for Communication, pp. 2 – 15.

Gregory, Kristina (2008), *Celebrities: Who They Are, How They Gain Popularity, and Why Society is So Fascinated with Them and Their Court Cases*, Honors Thesis, Communication, Media and Theatre Arts, Eastern Michigan University.

Kok, Naomi (n.d.), *Religious Conversion Compared*, MA Thesis in Theology and Religious Studies, Leiden University.

Mandaville, Peter (2008), How do religious beliefs affect politics?, *Global Politics*, Vol. 8, No. 09, pp. 97 – 122.

Mitra, Archan (2011), New Media and Convergence: A Development Communication Perspective, *Global Media Journal – Indian Edition*, 2(2)., 1 – 8.

Mujiburrahman (2006), *Feeling Threatened: Muslim–Christian Relations in Indonesia's New Order*, Ph.D. Thesis, Utrecht University, The Netherlands.

Rahman, Taufiqur, et.al. (2018), *Hijrah and the Articulation of Islamic Identity of Indonesian Millenials Using the Instagram*, Research Report for Visiting Professor Program, Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta.

Tanzania, Tanzil (2010), *Stop Kristenisasi: Membongkar Gerakan Pemurtadan dan Mencari Solusi Menghadapi Program Kristenisasi* [Stop Christianization: Unveiling the Apostasy Movement and In Search of Solution to face With the Christianization Program], Jakarta: Al-Fajr Media.

Turkle, Sherry (2001), Who Am We?, in David Trend (ed.), *Reading Digital Culture*, Malden: Blackwell Publishers, pp. 236 – 252.

Tyler, Tom R. (2002), Is the Internet Changing Social Life?: It Seems the More Things Change, the More They Stay the Same, *Journal of Social Issues*, 58(1), 195 – 205.

Zailia, Hj. Siti (2015), Murtad dalam Perspektif Syafi'i dan Hanafi [*Murtad* in the Perspectives of Syafi'i and Hanafi], *Istinbath*, 15(XIV), 67 – 88.