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Ambiguous Encounters: Sufi Meditation and Religious Boundaries in Cyberspace

In this paper I identify and explore an online genre of “Sufi meditation” tutorials and courses that exist within the mindfulness and meditation cyber-marketplace. I will first map the visual and textual content of sites that teach and promote “Sufi meditation”: how they describe themselves, how they transmit knowledge, how they present Sufism, how they position themselves vis-à-vis Islam, what they advertise to offer, and what (if any) transactions they seek from visitors to their sites. I then turn to an exploration of what this cyber genre means for encounters with Islam and the maintenance and/or diffusion of religious boundaries. How, if at all, are these sites that advertise and teach “Sufi meditation” inviting people to Islam? Attempts to answer this question unearth a tension between this genre of cyberspace Sufism as offering a free-standing, non-religious practice one can integrate with other wellness/meditation practices in the contemporary mindfulness marketplace, and as offering something that is part of Islamic tradition to which one makes a commitment as a Muslim through these meditations and other ‘spiritual’ practices. I argue that in this tension, we see a deep ambiguity embedded in the Sufi meditation sites themselves, which allows for ambiguous encounters with Islam.