
MEDIATION AND MUHAMMAD'S MESSAGE: CHARACTERISTICS OF ONLINE ISLAMIC EVANGELISM CONSUMED BY INDIAN YOUTH

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ABSTRACT

Religious media plays a vital role in reforming and changing the socio-religious and cultural lifestyle of the society. This paper looks at the character of online Islamic evangelism, which targets Muslim youth of Indian backgrounds and addresses the convergence of religious communication and modern media. Assessing the role of Islamic evangelism in the socio-religious and cultural lifestyle of young Muslims, it applies a content analysis to major Islamic media outlets online to find out their approaches to evangelism, the traits and trends of Islamic evangelism, and consumption trends among Muslim youth in India.

Keywords: *Islam, Media, Televangelism, Arab World, Indian Muslim, Indonesian Muslim, Islamic Propagation*

INTRODUCTION

What are the traits and trends that characterize online Islamic evangelism and how is such content consumed by Muslim youth in India? This paper attempts to present an overview of the convergence of religious and online communication among young Muslims of Indian and Arab backgrounds. Assessing the role of Islamic evangelism in the socio-religious and cultural lifestyle of young Muslims, it applies a content analysis to major Islamic media outlets online to find out their approaches to evangelism, the traits and trends of Islamic evangelism, and consumption trends among Muslim youth. Religious media plays a vital role in influencing the socio-religious and cultural lifestyle of a nation. According to Anderson (1991) the rise of a new and literate public was one consequence of the rapid expansion of the book publishing industries in the sixteenth century and the use of these industries by religious institutions in the form of Catholic or Protestant churches. Because the mass adaptation of media technologies results in societal change, the relationship between online

media communication and religious expression can be used to illustrate the religious (as well as political or cultural) developments within society (Bahfen 2008). In the 7th century after Jesus Christ, the rise of Islam in the era of the Prophet Muhammad came through disseminating the religion's message in the 'medium' most widely available at the time: the spoken and written word. Muhammad also sent his envoys on horseback to the neighboring rulers and kings with scripts and letters inviting them to Islam. He spoke to the followers of the existing monotheistic faiths, Judaism and Christianity (who the Qur'an addresses as the 'people of the book'), by referring to and reciting verses from the Qur'an, which told the stories of Moses and Jesus. This illustrated the recognition – even then – of using media to engage in communication and appealing to portray a message. The communication tools of Islam's earliest years were described as being based on intellectual and sociological reformation and renaissance (Arnold 1913).

Today, the instantaneous exchange of information is the defining characteristic of the global economy (Castells 2011). The past twenty years have seen the rise of a global media dominated in the late twentieth century by television (Hermann & McChesney 2001) and later online (Castells 2011). Today news, views and opinions can be telecast through the globe instantaneously. Modern communication involves new means of transmission and dissemination exemplified by the internet, which has become an important medium capable of spreading a complex message to a large audience. Religious organizations and movements deploy modern communication methods and tools (O'Leary 1996). The advent of satellite technology and the internet led to an outbreak of religious publications (Stout & Buddenbaum 1996), shaped and suggested new propagation methods for major religions such as Christianity and Islam.

ISLAMIC TELEVANGELISM – AN OVERVIEW

Televangelism as a term was first used by Jeffrey K. Hadden and Charles E. Swann as pointed out by Land (1993). It was used to describe a new form of religious broadcasting combining television and evangelism. Televangelism is an inherently modern form of religious practice, one tied to modern technological media that enables its production, distribution, and consumption. Televangelism can be read in the context of the rise, over the past several decades, of conservative evangelical and fundamentalist denominations, and involves media (radio, television, and increasingly the internet) which is utilized to spread a religious message. As Gordon (2005: 309) explains,

Religious media exert narrative influence upon lives and situations, shape and activate realms of social action, confer power upon those in religious authority and empower those who are not. . . . TV broadcasts, proselytic videos, billboards, handbills and print tabloids as visual artifacts do more than publicize how the spirit operates in everyday life. They also propel audiences into imagined communities where there is tangible evidence of the spirit operating through people, villages, neighbourhoods, cities, nations and the world.

According to Stewart (1993) the person who holds religious authority in Islamic society is someone to whom a follower of Islam turns for advice, to whom one resorts or refers for help or consultation when faced with a difficult problem. He argues that there have been different forms of authority that have existed in various contexts in the history of Islamic

societies, and that these forms of authority have been in potential, if not inherent, conflict (Stewart 1993). With authority also comes power. Many scholars define power as one's ability to make others do what one wants them to do, or to make them obey (Tischler 2010). For Weber (1978), power refers to every possibility within a social relationship of imposing one's own will, even against opposition, without regard to the basis for this possibility.

Preaching is neither unique to, nor new in, Islam. Antoun (1989) examined the role of Muslim preachers with a focus on their role in their communities, their strategies in establishing themselves, and the content of their Friday sermons or *khutba*. He explains that in the early Islamic period, there were many different types of preachers, not just the *khatib*, who gives the *khutba*; these preachers also included the *wa'iz* (admonisher), and the *qass* (religious story-teller). Modern day Islamic preachers, however, act as *imams* (prayer leaders), warners, reminders, admonishers and story-tellers all at once (Antoun 1989).

Contemporary Islamic evangelism is of two types, non-governmental and state-sponsored (Moll 2010). The state-sponsored Islamic evangelism manifests itself in the form of and through activities of international organizations like the Muslim World League, Organization of Islamic Conference, and World Association of Muslim Youth. These organizations pursue their activities mainly through financing educational and publishing activities of their affiliated institutions. Non-governmental evangelism is also pursued (albeit on a geographically limited level) by numerous organizations in non-Muslim majority countries, chiefly in the West. These organizations avoid direct involvement in political affairs and rather operate on a societal level. Their relative success attests to the fact that Islamic evangelism has indeed come to the West (Moll 2010).

In the context of globalization and transnational communications, the contemporary Muslim preacher mediates between tradition and modernity as well as the spiritual and materialistic (Antoun 1989). By offering audiences competing visions of how to steer a culturally authentic course through the disorienting contradictions that characterize their everyday lives, today's preachers contribute to evolving public discourses on religion and power in society. Through the dissemination of their symbolic messages and images, they articulate the changing nature of authority structures while contributing to the reconstruction of alternative ones (Larkin 2008).

Historically, the term televangelist refers to Christian propagators who take donations from wealthy followers (Hadden & Shupe 1987) while Islamic evangelism refers to the modern form of Islamic propagation of both religious principles and Islamic values in day to day life (Larkin 2008). In most of the cases Islamic evangelical content is accessible free of charge online (Larkin 2008).

THE MIDDLE EASTERN CONTEXT

Over the last two decades, Islamic evangelism in the Arab world has been playing a pivotal role in not only shaping the religious persona of Muslim youth (Schleifer 2007) but molding a socio-political façade particularly among academic circles and reflected in the strategic drift of cyberspace. According to Ahmed Abu Haiba (in Chammah 2010) the two major types of Islamic evangelist discourse can be clustered as:

- Saudi-influenced content that has been obviously embodied by conservative Wahhabi ideology and representing the majority of Muslim media.

- Progressive or moderate Muslim media with middle ground ideology giving more focus to Islamic culture, arts and social norms.

While Saudi-influenced content is mostly focused on ritual and spiritual aspects of the religion, with less dedication towards social development issues (such as women's empowerment and so on), Abu Haiba believes that both conservative and liberal Muslim media are somehow approaching gender relations and Muslim women's social situation with the least significance. For instance, the two types of Islamic evangelical content agree on forbidding all relations between men and women outside of marriage, and oppose the intermingling of the two sexes. However, these media outlets differ in how they define and criminalize the mixing of genders.

Despite the differences in approach and ideology, Islamic discourse has grown in popularity and moved to new and mainstream Arabic networks beyond strictly Islamic proselytization channels, which typically have limited viewership (Moll 2010). This is evidenced by the presence of high-profile Islamic preacher, Egypt's Amr Khaled, on channels such as Al-Mihwar; the presence of other widely known Muslim religious scholars such as Saudi Arabian preachers Ahmad Al Shugairi and Sheikh Salman al-Oadah on the Middle East Broadcasting Corporation; and Saudi cleric Dr. Mohammed al-Oraifi on the Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation.

INDONESIAN TRENDS IN ISLAMIC EVANGELISM

The Indonesian case illustrates the key role of public preaching and sermons, particularly in the early periods of the coming of Islam to the country. Such public practices worked to propagate Islamic teachings. As Muzakki (2010: 25) describes,

Irrespective of the debate, one important point can be made that it was so-called Muslims "foreigners" who brought Islam to the region in its early stage...In the context of contemporary Indonesian Islam, Islamic transmission through both the published documentation and oral tradition of communication shows its presence in an active way (Akh. Muzakki 2010).

In recent developments, Islamic evangelism or miniseries has experienced a boom through a number of Indonesian TV channels. This boom reflects a global phenomenon in the Muslim world as Indonesia's media replicates what is happening in places such as Egypt, where proselytization through electronic media is a growing phenomenon as exemplified by the popularity of preachers such as `Amr Khaled (Moll 2010). Islamic evangelism in Indonesia has its own `Amr Khaleds - Abdullah Gymnastiar (or more popularly addressed as Aa Gym), Yusuf Mansur, Arifin Ilham and the late Jeffry Al Buchori who have become prominent preachers and mentors whose religious content people can enjoy on mainstream (and not specifically Islamic evangelical) TV channels such as RCTI, SCTV, and TransTV. However, these popular Islamic evangelists seem to have neglected the youth and the teenagers as audiences for their own televangelism activities. Even though promoting active piety to the public through the ritual practices of popular—and liberal—Sufism, these so-called lay Islamic televangelists have not addressed this sub-set of the Indonesian Muslim population (the largest in the world) sufficiently (Muzakki 2010).

RESEARCH DESIGN

This paper applies textual analysis to the consumption of key sites of Islamic evangelism that are consumed and visited by Indian youth. Specifically, it attempts to answer the question of what characterises online Islamic evangelism and how such content is consumed by Muslim youth in India. Because of the nature of evangelical media, religious content comprises of texts that have an impact on social change. As Fairclough (2003: 8) describes:

Texts have causal effects upon, and contribute to changes in, people (beliefs, attitudes, etc.), actions, social relations, and the material world. It would make little sense to focus on language in new capitalism if we didn't think that texts have causal effects of this sort, and effects on social change... These effects are mediated by meaning-making.

Even though evangelism is an aspect of the contemporary global mediascape, it is only of late that studies have begun to emerge on the cultures and practices of televangelism in major Muslim minority populations such as India. There is a need for more studies on the production, circulation and consumption aspects of televangelism and it is hoped that this paper can contribute towards the contextual nature of 'televangelist' practices in the Muslim world in general and India in particular.

DISCUSSION

According to Jameel (2013) the vital factor that makes Muslim televangelism different from Christian televangelism is that among Muslims, it is slowly becoming the mainstream, rather than remaining on the fringes.

There was a time, not very long ago, when these ultras were few, in the worldwide attempt to revive Islam...Debate and tolerance is slowly losing ground and instead one is witnessing increased bigotry. These evangelists have become cult figures and any criticism against them is conveniently turned into a criticism of Islam itself.

Two of the most well-known Islamic televangelists include the late Ahmed Deedat and Zakir Naik. Deedat's televangelical techniques are of a particular kind. He has little to say about Sufism or Shi'ism, for instance, and makes no particular demand for establishing an Islamic state. Bala Muhammed opines that Deedat "opened the eyes of millions of Muslims in the fine art of inter-religious dialogue" and that his language skills and oratory talent, and his mastery of other scriptures "endeared him to the millions who have seen his videos or read his tracts, millions of which are sent free of charge all over the world" (Muhammad 2002).

Deedat was born in Gujarat, India and then moved to South Africa with his father during his childhood. In Durban, Deedat went to both Hindu school and traditional Muslim learning centre, despite his ambition for higher studies; he began to start working at a Christian Missionary (Westlund 2003). Deedat, with an extraordinary orator skill set, focused on comparative religious discourses. Deedat fashioned his speeches in a way to 'shield Islam' from the intrusion of Christian missions in Africa, particularly the Jehovah, the Pentecost and the Baptists etc. Saudi Arabia wasn't failed this time to identify the scholarly Deedat and support him in his mission. They arranged necessary requirements on time to make

Deedat audible globally. He associated with the MWL (Muslim World League) and WAMY (World Assembly of Muslim Youth) (Sadouni 2007). Saudi often lured Deedat to become a goodwill ambassador of their Wahhabi Islam and preach on it. Even though Deedat accepted their prizes and promises, he did not completely submit to the extremism of Wahhabi views and sectarian bias. Deedat increasingly appeared as an independent religious entrepreneur supported by rich individuals from the Gulf (Sadouni 2007).

By 1980s, Deedat became attentive to counter American Pentecostalism. Deedat adopted modern means of religious preaching such as changing language of communication into English, pamphlets, television and video (Larkin 2008). Deedat became proficient to debate against televangelist tycoons like Billy Graham. Those debates were recorded in video cassettes and distributed worldwide (Sadouni 2007).

Internet evolution followed immediately behind satellite TV in Muslim populated countries. By early 1990s Islam was increasingly being discussed online by western educated Muslims while Muslim discourse was increasingly being dominated by religious and community leaders, and propagation institutes or organizations, who had realized the unlimited potential of online media (Anderson 2009). Yusuf Al-Qaradawi—self acclaimed ‘Global Mufti’ was one among the first in list, whose messages started transmitting globally via online means (Skovgaard-Petersen & Graf 2009). IslamOnline.net which was launched in 1996 in Qatar reflects how a small Islamic university project developed into a global television and online evangelism venture with geopolitical implications (Abdel-Fadil 2011). Deedat had an idiosyncratic way of approaching evangelism. He adopted the Bible as a supporting source of authority to the Quran; he preferred to use English as a medium of communication to Arabic.

Comments online illustrate how the work of Deedat gained currency and popularity among Indian Muslim youth. For example: The young subscribers of Ahmed Deedat’s Facebook page still demand to watch the videos of his famous speeches and debates on ‘Muhammad in Bible’ and ‘Jesus in Qur’an’. Most of the youngsters are keen to equip themselves with the arguments of Ahmed Deedat to contribute to the Islam-Christianity debates. They are also interested to know, like and share the videos and posts where Ahmed Deedat defending Islam from Christian televangelists. His videos titled ‘What is wrong with Muslims’, ‘Does God Exist’, ‘Was Islam Spread by Sword’, ‘To All Christians Make up your Mind’, ‘Ahmed Deedat Destroys the Christianity in Eight Minutes’ are also popular among youth in social media (Facebook & YouTube) as the most shared and discussed items. Ahmed Deedat with Pastor Stanley Sjoberg is the most popular among Televangelist Vs Televangelist category. His views against sectarian based classes and divisions in Islam are also viral among youth in the form of posters. Facebook fan pages of Ahmed Deedat with more than 2 million subscribers indicate the wide spread and concrete popularity of his evangelism among young Muslims even years after his demise (Ahmed Deedat (Arabic) & Sheikh Ahmed Deedat-Facebook fan page).

Larkin views Deedat’s televangelism raises issues of reference and presence, the boundaries of religious practice and their transgression, and how religious identity is formed through the hostile and tactile engagement with competing religious practices. Religious reformism is part of a tradition internal to Islam. Certainly the emergence of Islamic evangelist movements in the last few decades has drawn heavily on modes of training within the Islamic tradition.

Deedat's media practice reveals the traveling of Christian rhetorical practices to Islamic televangelism and the movement of a Muslim cleric to Christian spaces. His style of argument is effectively met a reflexive critique that turns Christianity into an object language – both through his oral and written arguments and through the forms through which those arguments are circulated (Larkin 2008).

By early 1980's India started staging new form of Hindu, Muslim and Sikh identity politics. The Indian Muslim awareness began to concur with the globalization tendencies. At this dawn, new Islamic bodies and layman evangelist became obvious from the traditional sectarian scholars and institutions (Reetz 2010). Among them Zakir Naik, was perhaps the most influential televangelist with Wahhabi ideology (Swami 2011).

Zakir Naik, who is perhaps the most popular preacher in the Subcontinent, has a deep-rooted influence among the young Muslims of India and Pakistan. He, like his predecessor-Ahmed Deedat, has gained religious authority even though he lacks traditional schooling. Unlike Deedat Zakir Naik has been a staunch opponent of Sufi and Shia school of thoughts. His radical views gained animosity at one side where he gained popularity at another side (Haqqani 2011).

The Mumbai based Zakir Naik who was professionally a medical doctor appealed to the new wave religiosity among the Muslim middle classes of India (Swami 2011). In 1991 Naik left his medical practice and established the Islamic Research Foundation (Haqqani 2011). Following the footsteps of his mentor – Ahmed Deedat, Naik aimed to show the preeminence of Islam through comparative religious discourses. Rather than merely talking on Christianity, Naik also laid emphasize to other major religions such as Judaism and Hinduism. Naik also addressed the myths and superstitious against Islam. His outspoken dialogues often ran over the traditional Islamic perceptions. Based on the conspiracy movie *Loose Change 2nd Edition* Zakir Naik claimed that the 9/11 as an 'inside job' than a terrorist attack planned by Al-Qaida (Naik 2008). Naik was successful in becoming a global preacher by taken timely advantage of online media. He has highlighted via online that: "unfortunately Muslims are very backward as far as media is concerned", that "we Muslims are unable to present ourselves well; others are coming up with new ways of bashing Islam" and that "we require international TV channels of our own in English" (Rajan 2009).

In 2006, Naik established Peace TV headquartered in Dubai with leading professional support. The channel which "broadcasts Free to Air programs in both English and Urdu 24/7 to 125 countries worldwide" rapidly became popular among Muslims including Western resident minorities (Sadouni 2013). PeaceTV screens shows led by sheikhs and preachers who are mostly converts with different ethnical backgrounds, like Abdur Raheem Green (Tanzania), Bilal Philips (Jamaica), Yusuf Estes (USA) and Hussein Yee (Malaysia) are few among them. However, the commercialized format does not imply that Naik propagates a liberal form of Islam. Even though Naik was attached to the Sufi movement in the early stages of his career (Reetz 2010), he presently favors the approach of Saudi Arabian Wahhabis who allegedly fund Naik's global evangelism.

Naik's audience appears to be mostly modern, educated, and English-speaking. Examples of such values include gender equality and human rights. Naik himself, in fact, wears a suit and a tie. Importantly, ties are considering unacceptable by many Muslims, (Islamic Academy 2011) and those who wear them are categorized as—western, which in effect means disbelieving or un-Islamic (Ozay 1990).

Naik's reception among Indian Muslim students can be gleaned by the many comments made on his Facebook page. The major topics on Zakir Naik fan pages in Facebook are: The proselytic videos and Q&A videos. The Arab and Indo-Pakistani youth have been proudly propagating these videos, comments, posters among their kith and kin in social media. Zakir Naik's presentations on Quran and Science related topics are also getting good viewership and reach in social media. Naik's decades old speeches and debates are still popular among them. Short videos of Zakir Naik's presentations titles: 'An Atheist Asked a Good Question', 'Answer to Engineer Brother', 'Christian Sister Accept Islam After a Long Discussion with Zakir Naik', 'Brahmin Young Man Asked a Question' are most widely discussed in social media. Zakir Naik's debate with Sri Sri Ravi Shankar (Art of Living) on Islam and Hinduism is the most popular among a Evangelist Vs Evangelist category. After Naik's slight inclination towards extremist content and sectarian based speeches, a notable minority of the youngsters in social media took interest to quite his evangelism. That resulted in spreading videos where Zakir Naik's mistakes and blunders in debates and answers. Among such videos popular in social media are: 'Zakir Naik Exposed', 'Zakir Naik in Sri Lanka', 'Debunking and Exposing Zakir Naik', 'Naik – 25 mistakes in 5 min' and 'Zakir Naik Exposed by Sri Sri Ravishankar' (Zakir Naik & PeaceTV fan pages in Facebook).

While the rhetoric and argumentative skills of Zakir Naik have been inspired many to accept Islam, his extremely religious and frosty and unsociable statements also invited criticism and protests. Naik's policies and perceptions on Indian government system calling for India to be ruled by Shariah law invited large amount of protests. *The Times of India* reports; "the fact is that barring the band of Muslims whose bruised egos Naik suitably massages through his Islam supremacist talks, most rational Muslims and non-Muslims find his brand of Islam a travesty of the faith". *The Times* also argues that "the Wahhabi-Salafist brand of Islam, bankrolled by petro-rich Saudi Arabia and propagated by preachers like Naik, does not appreciate the idea of pluralism" (Wajihuddin 2010).

Prominent Indian journalist veteran Khushwant Singh assessed Zakir Naik's statements as immature and unscholarly. Singh remarks "they seldom augment above the level of undergraduate college debates, where contestants vie with each other to score brownie points" (Singh 2007). Singh reminds Naik's audiences "listen to him with rapt attention and often explode in enthusiastic applause when he rubbishes other religious texts" (Singh 2005).

CONCLUSION

While certainly there is a difference of black and white between Islam and Christianity in preaching the religion, the predilection of online as a medium are the same. As Marshal McLuhan told us through his aphorism that has become a cliché, that the medium is the message (McLuhan 1964). By shifting the religious discourse to the world of entertainment, it will make religious authority irrelevant. Iconic stars begin to replace scholars.

Even though Amr Khaled of Egypt repeatedly comments that he is not a sheikh/religious scholar, the most important aspect of that comment is: "And you do not need a Shaikh. I am far more entertaining and accommodating" (Baig 2011). Their slip of tongue creates dreadful remarks and questions the course of history. Another example is India's Zakir Naik's assessment of the martyrdom of Imam Hussain at Karbala. Naik's gaffe to justify Yazeed's atrocities and tyranny had invited a scholarly discrepancy and resulted in communal nuisance. Not all the Islamic televangelist programs have gone to the extremes

delineated above; we can see features of these most successful programs in others as well, for instance the debates and discourses of Ahmed Deedat.

The obliteration of scholarly authority increases as televangelists with little knowledge of religion takes up the intellectual capacity through the magic of media. On the facade the Muslim televangelists are the forerunners of an Islamic renaissance, particularly among the youth. But in reality they may be hijacking the Islamic spirit of move. The Islamic televangelists must do more and more religious studies to make their statements more authentic and constructive. They must give least importance to enhancing the rhetoric and start getting more scholarly support. If and only if the televangelism become a mouthpiece of Islamic scholarly circle, it can bring up the community as it really aim for. They must also understand the nature of communication and media they use. Islamic televangelism must get rid of the 'War of Words' and start aiming for 'Way of Word.'

This paper found overpoweringly constructive approach towards online evangelism that replicates the intense objective of many who are involved in Islamic evangelism by using the field of communication technology to convey their faith. Making their faiths relevant and appealing to contemporary audiences is the main aim of many of those evangelists. Nevertheless, this research found, there are some who deform this objective for their own vested interests, such as becoming a socio-religious icon, for their own financial prosperity and/ or for generating a new-age Islamic cult. Unlike the earlier televangelism, the over pollution of sectarian content in online Islamic evangelism created a fracture on the unified Islamic preaching style. This research paper could find that the modern evangelistic phenomenon of transmitting knowledge without training, or an authority (*ijazah*) from traditional school has been leveraged by online Islamic evangelism. It is hoped that this research paper will lead to advanced discussion and researches on the role of online Islamic evangelism in creating modern Islamic evangelists and the style of online Islamic materials among youth. This paper also recommends researches on the depiction of Islamic evangelism and the role of Christian televangelists.

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Web Sites

<https://www.facebook.com/ahmed.deedaat/likes>

<https://www.facebook.com/ShiekhAhmedDeedat?ref=ts&fref=ts>

<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Zakir-Naik/104063299631522?ref=ts&fref=ts&rf=115140031831904>

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