Faith, Interfaith, and YouTube: Dialogue, or Derision?

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Introduction

The Internet has radically transformed the way people of faith communicate. The great successes of web 2.0, Facebook, MySpace, and YouTube have enabled people to overcome the tyranny of distance and communicate at speeds previously unimaginable. However, despite the dynamic nature of the medium, the quality of interfaith relations online, particularly on YouTube, is neither new nor revolutionary, but, instead, reflects the centuries of animosity that characterised dialogue among the pious in the years before the nineteenth century. Historically, contact between the advocates of different religions typically resulted in a battle for souls; conversion was the aim, ridicule or polemic the method, apologetics the defence. The idea of searching for common ground across beliefs was almost unimaginable, when the present, as well as eternal life, depended on absolute commitment to an ideal. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, however, a fundamental change shifted the nature of interfaith dialogue towards an ethos of commonality, consensus, and conflict minimisation. The principles of multiculturalism and mutual respect ensured that, where priests and imams, rabbis and gurus once preached for souls, they now preached the common ground. However, as the internet rapidly expanded the limits of the marketplace of ideas, a generation of zealous believers set out to return interfaith dialogue to its adversarial roots. YouTube, unique in its *laissez-faire* approach to censorship, the anonymity of its operational model, and its visual interface, provided the perfect medium for those who chafed under the 'confines' of multicultural acceptance and now felt able to unleash the contempt they so clearly felt for other religions. In the cyberworld of unrestricted freedom that YouTube provides, the pious denizens of the net have declared an end to dialogue, and a return to the models of the past, where those believers who are the most abrasive provide the most vociferous polemics and express the strongest hatred, attracting the most attention.

Definitions

In order to draw a comparison between the different types of interreligious contact, it is necessary to define what is meant by 'interfaith dialogue'. In the

complex world of religious ideologies, even the term 'interfaith' can be difficult to define, relying as it does, in part, on a widely-agreed upon and clear definition of 'religion'. Questions often arise over whether interfaith dialogue can exist between those who adhere to a historical religious identity (such as Christians) and those who belong to more recent ideological and political movements (such as socialists), and where the line between 'interfaith' and 'intrafaith' begins. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints has typically entered into dialogue with mainline Protestant, Catholic, and Evangelical groups on the premise that such a gesture constitutes 'intrafaith', while many Catholics, Protestants, and born-again Christians consider the Mormons to have sufficiently deviated from 'traditional' Christianity that any interaction between the two constitutes an 'interfaith' dialogue. For the purpose of this essay, it will be assumed that, where two participants consider themselves to be engaging across two different religions, such engagement will constitute 'interfaith', if this is between Jews and Hindus, or the Greek Orthodox and Armenian Apostolic churches. The World Council of Churches' sub-unit on Dialogue with People of Living Faith and Ideologies created a set of guidelines that would set the parameters for what constituted a 'dialogue' between people of faith. These included the points; that a dialogue begins when people meet; that dialogue depends upon mutual understanding and mutual trust; that dialogue makes it possible to share in service; and that dialogue becomes the medium of authentic witness.[1]

Such a definition is sufficiently broad to encompass a range of engagements between different faiths, and indicates the inclusive nature that has typified common understandings of interfaith dialogue since the early twentieth century. However, the notion of an "authentic witness" is an almost exclusively Christian concept, and it is arguable that, overall, only the first three are relevant to understanding 'dialogue' at its broadest level, even if it remains a specific intention of Christian groups. Similarly, dialogue between Christians and Jews has typically rested upon the necessity of Christians negating a history of anti-Semitism and offering explicit recognition that Judaism is a legitimate religion in its own right, and not merely a now out-of-date tradition that has been superseded by Christianity.[2]

The declaration towards a global ethic from the Bangalore Interfaith Conference in 1993 typifies the language used at interfaith meetings, and provides a broad and non-denominational understanding of 'interfaith';

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[1] Martin Forward, *A Short Introduction Inter-Religious Dialogue* (Oxford: One World Publishers, 2001), p. 11.
[2] Julia Neuberger, *On Being Jewish* (London: Heinemann Publishers, 1995), p. 241.

> We must treat others as we wish others to treat us. We make a commitment to respect life and dignity, individuality and diversity, so that every person is treated humanely, without exception. We must have patience and acceptance. We must be able to forgive, learning from the past but never allowing ourselves to be enslaved by memories of hate.[3]

Among Abrahamic religions, interfaith dialogue tends to diminish the role and importance of exclusivist elements in faiths that have traditionally presented themselves as the only root to salvation; the idea of the 'chosen people', salvation *sola fide*, or the finality of prophethood, are rarely discussed.[4] Above all, in either a lay or priestly capacity, participants in interfaith dialogue tend to be well educated in specifics of alternative faiths.[5] With a precedent established by the acceptance of some forms of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Unitarianism, into the 'interfaith' movement, the recent meteoric rise to prominence of what has been referred to as the 'New Atheism' has seen many interfaith groups willing to recognise non-theistic and atheistic points of view and engage them in discussion and debate, although it is worth noting that debates between theists and non-theists typically tend to be the most polemical within the comparatively benign confines of interfaith dialogue. It is worth, then, taking the lead from the interfaith community in accepting non-theists into any study of YouTube interreligious communication.

Towards a Methodology of the Study of Online Communities

Given the nature of the Internet, and in particular, the very recent development of YouTube, critical studies of the role of religion on the Internet are comparatively rare. Consequently, there is relatively little to draw on in terms of developing a methodological approach towards the study of religion on YouTube. However, some academics have tried to lay the foundation of a methodological approach towards online communities. David Nash argues that the rapid growth of the Internet should not perplex the academy and leave it without any analytical tools of study, considering there have been numerous communication revolutions in the past two thousand years.[6] Instead, he

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[3] The text of the Declaration Towards a Global Ethic was printed in *World Faiths Insight*, no. 6 (1933). See also Hans Küng and Karl-Josef Kuschel (eds) *A Global Ethic: The Declaration of the Parliament of the World's Religions* (London: SCM, 1993).

[4] Elizabeth Sirriyeh, 'Wahhabi, Unbelievers and the Problems of Exclusivism', *Bulletin of British Society for Middle Eastern Studies,* vol.16, no.2, (1989), p. 124.

[5] Edward J. Jurji, 'Interfaith and Intercultural Communication', *Numen,* vol.15, no.2, (1968), p. 86.

[6] David Nash, 'Religious Sensibilities in the Age of the Internet: Freethought Culture and the Historical Context of Communication Media', in *Practicing religion in the Age of the*

suggests, the Internet can be compared to the previous revolutions such as the printing press, and the same techniques that have been used in the past can once again be used to compare and draw parallels between modern online communities and their predecessors.[7] There is much to be said for this approach, however it fails to take into account the full ramifications of the success of global communications. While previous communication revolutions certainly enabled an ever-increasing body of people access to both print and audio media, the Internet and, in particular, YouTube, is the only communication format that allows individuals, almost regardless of technical skills, an opportunity to communicate ideas in a near-uncensored environment. Manuel Castells argues that the modern information technology revolution will be the biggest revolution experienced by humanity since the invention of the Greek alphabet in 700 BCE, and that even in its earliest phases it will affect all societies, economies and polities on the planet.[8]

In 'The Death of an Online Muslim Discussion group', Göran Larsson argues that, at present, there is insufficient data to draw a "unified theory of religion and the Internet", but that that should not make researchers afraid to tackle the area.[9] Instead, they should understand the revolutionary nature of communication on the Internet, and create a medium between the kind of empiricism that has been used in the past, participant observation and interviews, and new ways of thinking about the field.[10] Researchers should not view the Internet as a phenomenon that is solely dependent on the real world, nor should they limit their study to the purely virtual.[11] Instead, combining online and offline research, it should be possible to understand what information and experiences participants are bringing from real life to the cyberworld.[12]

Media, eds Steward M. Hoover and Lynn Schofield Clark (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), p. 276.

[7] Nash, 'Religious Sensibilities in the Age of the Internet', p. 276.

[8] Bruce B. Lawrence, 'Allah On-Line: The Practice of Global Islam in the Information Age', in *Practicing religion in the Age of the Media*, eds Steward M. Hoover and Lynn Schofield Clark (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), p. 239.

[9] Göran Larsson, 'The Death of a Virtual Muslim Discussion Group: Issues And Methods In Analysing Religion On The Net', *Online-Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet,* vol. 1, no.1, (2005), p. 2.

[10] Larsson, 'The Death of a Virtual Muslim Discussion Group', p. 2.

[11] Larsson, 'The Death of a Virtual Muslim Discussion Group', p. 3.

[12] Larsson, 'The Death of a Virtual Muslim Discussion Group', p. 3.

Jan Fernback advocates a study of online religious phenomena through the tradition of ethnography.[13] Fernback adopted a methodology which made her intentions and objectives clear to the subjects she interviewed, but in the case of Internet chat and commentary sites, she argues in favour of observing for a substantial period of time and downloading conversation material, without actually participating in the debates.[14] She was, in Internet terminology, 'lurking'. This method would appear to work well for online communication, particularly as it limits the influence of the author in shaping dialogue or ideas. The 'new ethnography' methodology as advocated by John Saliba maintains the necessity of such an approach, specifically the importance of asking 'correct' questions and using culturally specific linguistic terminology in order to develop questions that allow the informants to express their attitudes, feelings and ideas.[15] However, the absence of real-world based research, and the potential anonymity of the Internet, poses a problem for this kind of approach, as it can never be clearly ascertained whether the actors in these communities are who they say they are.

Ideally, any approach to the study of the Internet should draw from the best of both worlds, recognising the fluidity of the World Wide Web and the speed at which it moves as a definitive boundary to older-style empiricism, but at the same time trying to make use of what statistical information is available. Taking a lead from anthropological approaches to studies of religion, a study of YouTube could adopt a phenomenological approach, recognising the immediacy of the fast-paced visual nature of the medium that provides little opportunity for self-reflection or substantive editing by members. To provide a set of guidelines, "real world" interfaith dialogue will form the basis upon which interreligious relations are analysed, examined, and compared online. There are admittedly limitations to this approach concerning the anonymity and authenticity of participants on YouTube. As Oliver Krüger suggests,

> Computer mediated communication (CMC) on the Internet constitutes hyper reality – thus, we do not have direct access to the social and personal reality of our empirical field. In addition to social and cultural selection effects that depend on, for example, our gender or our own religious convictions, the hyper reality of the Internet is only accessible through some technical filters that we, as researchers,

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[13] Jan Fernback, 'Internet Ritual: A Case Study of the Construction of Computer-Mediated Neopagan Religious Meaning', in *Practicing Religion in the Age of the Media*, eds Steward M. Hoover and Lynn Schofield Clark (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), p. 254.
[14] Fernback, 'Internet Ritual', p. 254.
[15] John A. Saliba, 'The New Ethnography and the Study of Religion', *Journal for the Scientific Study of* Religion, vol. 13, no. 2 (1974), p. 148.

cannot control. Therefore, we have to become aware of what we *can* see.[16]

However, in the absence of a viable way of contacting the denizens of YouTube, one can only take their online personas at face value – they are the way individuals present themselves to the world, and as such, the way their ideas and beliefs will be studied.

Interreligious Dialogue: Past and Present

While interaction between faiths is a phenomenon as old as religion itself, 'interfaith dialogue' as it has been defined is a relatively modern phenomenon, going back little further than the 1893 World Parliament of Religions.[17] Historically, among faiths preaching a doctrine of exclusivity, any communication between religions tended to be for the sole purpose of defamation or proselytising. Early works by Christian authors such as Augustine effectively ended the possibility of a dialogue between Jews and Christians, declaring:

> For whoever have turned, or are turning, or shall turn thence to Christ, it has been according to the foreknowledge of God, not according to the one and the same nature of the human race. Certainly none of the Israelites, who, cleaving to Christ, have continued in Him, shall ever be among those Israelites who persist in being His enemies even to the end of this life, but shall for ever remain in the separation which is here foretold. For the Old Testament, from the Mount Sinai, which gendereth to bondage, profiteth nothing, unless because it bears witness to the New Testament. Otherwise, however long Moses is read, the veil is put over their heart; but when any one shall turn thence to Christ, the veil shall be taken away.[18]

In Judaism, any dialogue was discouraged when the Oral Torah defined all gentiles as idolaters, creating an unfathomable gulf between Israel and its neighbours, and enforcing a self-imposed isolation of the Jewish communities.[19] While in Mecca, Muhammad encouraged the notion of a discussion between Jews, Christians, and the as-yet unorganised Muslim

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[16] Oliver Krüger, 'Discovering the Invisible Internet: Methodological Aspects of Searching Religion on the Internet', *Online – Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the* Internet, vol. 1, no. 1 (2005), p. 8.

[17] Peggy Morgan, 'The Study of Religions and Interfaith Encounter', *Numen,* vol. 42, no. 2 (1995), p. 157.

[18] Saint Augustine, *City of God*, Book XVI, ed. Phil Schaff (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2004), p. 347.

[19] John Hick (with Edmund S. Meltzer), *Three Faiths, One God*, (New York: Macmillan, 1989), p. 209.

community, with the *suras* proclaiming – "And do not argue with the followers of the Book except by what is best, save with those of them who act unjustly, and say: We believe in that which has been revealed to us and revealed to you, and our God and your God is One, and to Him do we submit".[20] However, the unwillingness of Christians or Jews to convert to the new monotheism ultimately led to a greater ferocity being employed to bring converts to Islam, which would ultimately condemn Jews and Christians to hellfire unless they submitted to the will of Allah.

Throughout the Medieval period, interreligious contact was primarily polemical, with Muslims accusing Christians of polytheism, Christians accusing Muslims of Arianism, and both accusing the Jews of having forsaken their Messiah. When William of Rubruck visited the court of the Great Khan in Karakorum, his primary mission was not to engage in a dialogue between civilisations, but rather to convert the Tartar hordes to Christianity as part of the effort against Muslim forces during the Seventh Crusade.[21] When William arrived in Karakorum, the debate organised between Taoists, Buddhists, Muslims, Christians, and shamanists descended into chaos as the participants, largely unaware of the beliefs of other faiths, either tried to convert one another (as was the case with William), or simply refused to find common ground, and instead resorted to talking only about the superiority of their faith or their understanding of the cosmos, with the conference finally collapsing into derisive laughter and heavy drinking.[22]

The few examples of interfaith dialogue that can be found before the nineteenth century stand out simply by virtue of being so different from the usual nature of interreligious relations, which was tense, antagonistic, and violent. Examples such as the rule of Akbar the Great, Islamic Spain, and the Ottoman Empire are better seen as oases of tolerance and understanding amidst a desert of intolerance, rather than as pointing to a history of peaceful ecumenism. Even in these instances, it should be remembered that polemic was still often as common as dialogue. Akbar's tenure as emperor of the Mughal state may have seen the encouragement of a dialogue between Christians, Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus, and Zoroastrians within the empire, to the extent that the Sultan would ultimately forge his own religious ethos out of the

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[20] *Qur'an* 29:46

[21] Silk Road Seattle, 'William of Rubruck's Account of the Mongols', University of Washington Education Department (2004), at
http://depts.washington.edu/silkroad/texts/rubruck.html, Accessed 23/12/09.

[22] Silk Road Seattle, 'William of Rubruck's Account of the Mongols'.

conversations, the *din-i llahi*, yet his descendants were quick to abandon such policies and return to a stricter adherence to traditional Islam.[23]

Even the great historical example of interfaith dialogue, the *convivencia*, could give rise to moments of contempt and derision between members of competing faiths. The conversion of the Deacon of Louis the Pious, Bodo, to Judaism in 838CE, caused a stir in the Christian world, not only because he abandoned his native (and presumed 'superior' faith) but for the polemical epistles that were written between the then Eleazar and his Christian opponent, a former Jew and Christian convert of Corduba, Pablo Álvaro. Both Eleazar and Alvaro strenuously tried to convince one another to return to the faith of their birth, in a discussion that can only be viewed as forceful and uncompromising, if civil. In the 18th letter between the men, Alvaro declares;

> Which of us better deserves the name of Israelite? You who, as you say, have been converted from idolatry to the worship of the Supreme God, and are a Jew not by race but by faith, or I who am a Hebrew both by faith and race? But I am not called a Jew because a new name has been given to me which the mouth of the Lord has named. Abraham is my father, for my forbears descended from that stem: for looking for the Messiah who was to come, and receiving him when he came, they are more truly Israel than those who were expecting him but rejected him at his coming, and have not ceased to hope for him, for you are still awaiting one whom you have already rejected. The Gentiles who daily are being converted to the faith of Israel take their place in the people of God, while you have adhered to the error of the Jews.[24]

These are hardly the words of a man who, despite the apparently convivial 'interfaith' atmosphere of the *convivencia*, was interested in pursuing a dialogue between religions. Similarly, some 400 years later, the debate between Nachmanides and Pablo Christiani (a Christian monk and former Jew) at the behest of King James I of Aragon proves that discussion between Judaism and Christianity remained primarily polemical, with both trying to undermine the faith of the other. In a prophetic glimpse of the future nature of interfaith communication on YouTube, Nachmanides stipulated that his debate must take place in an atmosphere of complete freedom of speech.[25]

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[23] Forward, *A Short Introduction Inter-Religious Dialogue*, p. 26.

[24] Pablo Alvaro, *Indiculus Luminosus*, Letter XVIII, in *A Social and Religious History of the Jews*, vol. 5, ed. Salo Wittmayer Baron (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952), p. 126.

[25] Frank Talmage, *Disputation and Dialogue: Readings in the Jewish-Christian Encounter* (Jerusalem: Ktav, 1975), p. 72.

The Ottoman Empire, while comparatively tolerant of diversity, was relatively disinterested in a dialogue between faiths, preferring instead to adhere to the supremacy of Islam and to leave the separate religious vilayets to their own affairs.[26] When religious minorities stirred up trouble, as was the case with the messianic movement of Shabbatai Zvi, authorities tended to abandon such dialogue in favour of forced conversion, with the erstwhile Messiah converting under the threat of the sword in front of the Sultan.[27]

It was the nineteenth century, and in particular the emergence of the Baha'i Faith, and the Parliament of the World's Religions in 1893CE, that would fundamentally change the nature of interreligious behaviour in the twentieth century and set the tone for 'interfaith' dialogue as we understand it today. The declaration by Baha'u'llah that not only was his revelation just the latest version of a continually revealed divine manifestation present in all the world's great religions, but that his followers should actively engage in a dialogue with followers of other religions in order to bring about a better world, set a radical new standard for interreligious communication. Similarly, drawing from the liberal tendencies within India, Swami Vivekananda's quotation of the *Bhagavad Gita* – "Whosoever comes to Me, through whatsoever form, I reach him; all men are struggling through paths that in the end lead to Me" – met with thunderous applause at the 1893 Parliament of the World's Religions, ushering in the beginning of the era of interfaith dialogue.[28]

In the last thirty years, interfaith dialogue has taken on an increasingly political element, with widespread condemnations of religious extremism and religiously motivated terror.[29]

A History of YouTube

Under the auspices of sharing videos from a dinner party, three friends and employees of a US company, PayPal, created the first easy to upload video sharing website on the Internet in 2004. Within a year it would become an

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[26] Caroline Finkel, *Osman's Dream*: *The Story of the Ottoman Empire 1300-1923*, (London: John Murray, 2005), pp. 280-281.

[27] Finkel, *Osman's Dream*, pp. 280-281.

[28] Swami Vivekananda, *Swami Vivekananda's Declaration to the World Parliament of Religions*, Ramakrishna Vivekananda Centre of New York (1996), at http://www.ramakrishna.org/chcgfull.htm. Accessed 23/12/09.

[29] Suzanne D. Rutland, 'Negotiating Religious Dialogue: A Response to the Recent Increase of Anti-Semitism in Australia', in *Negotiating the Sacred: Blasphemy and Sacrilege in a Multicultural Society*, eds Elizabeth Burns Coleman and Kevin White (Canberra: ANU E-Press, 2006), p. 27.

Internet phenomenon that revolutionised the face of the World Wide Web.[30] On 15 February 2005, the Internet domain name *YouTube.com* was activated for the first time, and as early as May 2005, the general public was given access to a preview of YouTube's capabilities.[31] In the June-September period of 2006, YouTube was the fastest growing website on the Internet, and the fifth most popular, outpacing even the popular social networking website MySpace.[32] Following a survey conducted on 16 July 2006, it was estimated that 100 million videos were being watched every day on YouTube, while a further 65,000 were being uploaded to the site in the same period.[33] Social media, particularly web 2.0 and YouTube, were singled out in Time Magazine's Person of the Year in 2006 list.[34] Most recently, the success of YouTube's format has spawned a series of alternative 'tubes', often with particular agendas. In autumn 2007, Christopher Wyatt, a student at Dallas Theological Seminary founded 'GodTube' as a conservative Christian (particularly Baptist) alternative to perceived secularism and anti-religious sentiment on YouTube.[35] Like its predecessor, GodTube proved to be the fastest growing website in August 2007, and received an investment of some $US30 million in May 2008.[36] A similar offshoot of YouTube, 'JewTube' was founded in early 2006, originally as a place for secular Jews to exchange cultural information, but more recently it has taken a religious bent with a series of rabbis posting theological discourses.[37] There exists a series of

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[30] Jefferson Graham, 'Video Website Pops Up, Invites Posting', *USA Today* (21 November 2005), at http://www.usatoday.com/tech/news/techinnovations/2005-11-21-video-websites_x.htm. Accessed 23/12/09.

[31] Alexa.com, 'YouTube.com Traffic Details', *Alexa.com*, updated daily, at http://www.alexa.com/data/details/main/youtube.com?q. Accessed 23/12/09.

[32] Gavin O'Malley, 'YouTube is the Fastest Growing Website', *Advertising Age* (21 July 2006), at http://adage.com/digital/article?article_id=110632. 1/06/2008.

[33] Reuters, 'YouTube Serves Up to 100 Million Videos a Day Online', *USA Today* (16 July 2006), at http://www.usatoday.com/tech/news/2006-07-16-youtube-views_x.htm. Accessed 23/12/09.

[34] Lev Grossman, '*Time's* Person of the Year: You', *Time Magazine* (13 December 2006), at http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1569514,00.html. Accessed 23/12/09.

[35] Ian Thomson, 'Christians Take on YouTube with GodTube', *IT Week* (30 April 2007), at http://www.itweek.co.uk/vnunet/news/2188871/christians-launch-godtube-com. Accessed 23/12/09.

[36] Ed Pilkington, 'Smile, You're on GodTube', *Guardian.co.uk* (12 May 2008), at http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/may/12/usa.religion. Accessed 23/12/09.

[37] Amiram Barkat, 'Seeking a Skullcap for Your Dog? Try JewTube', *Haaretz.com* (14 September 2007), at http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/pages/ShArt.jhtml?itemNo=879465&contrassID=19. Accessed 23/12/09.

particularly religious tubes, including islamictube.net, ourbahaitube.com, the sect specific catholic-tube.com and orthodoxtube.net, and the most recent muhammadtube.com, organised by conservative Christians with the specific intention of converting Muslims to Christianity.[38]

Above all, it is YouTube's relaxed position on censorship that has given it notoriety. While videos with explicit sexual content are removed, those which merely allude to sexuality, racism, and homophobia, only require members to certify that their date of birth puts them above the age of eighteen.[39] Similarly, material leaked, or that breaches official copyright regulations has typically been pulled from the website, although, as is often the case with the internet, viral messaging has enabled some material to stay online, regardless of censors' best efforts. Beyond this, there is no censorship – members are free to say what they like and to whom. While in theory members can report offending videos, there is no clear definition about what constitutes 'offensive material', and YouTube has been embroiled in some conflict over videos which, as a result of complaints from specific communities, have been taken down, only to be returned on the basis that their removal interferes with 'freedom of speech'.[40]

Interreligious Communication on YouTube

Without the guidelines of the social norms established by multiculturalism, and further freed by the anonymity of the Internet, interfaith communication on YouTube takes a markedly different form than the dialogue that is common in the real world. Discussion between believers on YouTube is effectively limited to often rambling condemnations of other faiths, usually by self-professed zealous believers. Unlike interfaith participants, most of the diatribes on YouTube tend to show that their authors are poorly versed in the tenants of other religions. Often repeated mantras characterise the discussion to make up for a lack of substance and any deep understanding of alternative religious positions. Posters have a tendency to assume the radical fringe represents the whole of a religion, ignoring the spectrum of beliefs within a faith. For instance, a characterisation of Islam by 'VenomfangX', while representing perhaps the more extreme elements of Salafism and Wahhabism, fails to recognise the far more liberal and esoteric interpretations of the Sufi tariqas,

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[38] Jack Coyle, 'Religious Websites Ape MySpace, YouTube', *USA Today* (18 April 2007), at http://www.usatoday.com/tech/webguide/internetlife/2007-04-18-religious-websites_N.htm. Accessed 23/12/09.

[39] Tom Zeller, 'A Slippery Slope of Censorship at YouTube', *New York Times* (9 October 2006), at http://www.nytimes.com/2006/10/09/technology/09link.html. Accessed 23/12/09.

[40] Zeller, 'A Slippery Slope of Censorship'.

with 'VenomfangX' arguing; "The primary message [of Islam] being 'Kill Jews wherever you can' – this message is not limited to the extremists, but rather is open policy".[41]

The information provided is usually from questionable sources or inaccurate. Demonstrating a typical misunderstanding, 'VenomfangX' argues that the crescent moon as a symbol of Islam has its origins in the fact that Allah was supposedly the moon god of the pagan pantheon worshipped by the pre-Islamic Arabs, an argument often put forward by evangelical Christian organisations in the United States.[42] Presenters often rely on their own religious scriptures to disprove the beliefs of others, or access their information from literature/websites provided by organisations of which they are a part – 'VenomfangX' routinely relies on the works of 'The Way of the Master ministries'.[43] The level of debate is no more sophisticated among those who have belonged to two different faiths. 'Converted2Islam' claims to be a former evangelical Christian who converted to Islam, and now presents videos encouraging Christians to change their faith in favour of Islam. 'Converted2Islam' has a tendency to rely on exclusively Islamic sources, often from websites promoting 'Qur'anic Sciences' and other 'miracles of the Qur'an'.[44] The 'many paths to God' approach, typified by Vivekananda's approach to interfaith, is entirely absent from this kind of discourse, with Converted2Islam stating specifically; "Islam is the only religion of God. All false religions teach the greatest evil – that is to worship creation".[45]

It is also quite common for the online commentators, in a fashion reminiscent of messianic movements throughout history, to claim that they have a monopoly on truth, and that their particular interpretation of their faith is the only acceptable one. They dismiss 'reformers' and people who attempt to take liberal or non-literal interpretations of religious texts, often arguing against the success of the scientific revolution and ideas such as the theory of evolution, while taking those portions of scientific information that they deem

[41] 'VenomFangX', 'Islam and Muslims and Allah, Oh My!', *YouTube.com* (19 August 2007), at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9s7LBORJJtI. Accessed 27/05/08.
[42] 'VenomFangX', 'Proving Islam Wrong', *YouTube.com* (20 January 2007), at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3kkSvgqhR-A. Accessed 27/05/08.
[43] 'VenomgFangX', 'Homepage', *YouTube.com* (2 May 2006), at http://www.youtube.com/user/venomfangx?ob=4. Accessed 27/05/08.
[44] 'Converted2Islam', 'Homepage', *YouTube.com* (10 January 2007), at http://www.youtube.com/user/Converted2Islam. Accessed 23/12/09.
[45] 'Converted2Islam', 'What is the True Religion?', *YouTube.com* (27 January 2008), at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pZrArWuzauk. 28/05/2008.

to support their cause.[46] Often, they prophesise an eschatology in the near future, with evangelical Christians arguing that the War on Terror, the September 11 attacks, the creation of the state of Israel, and the apparent conflict between Islam and the West, constitute a situation analogous to the tribulations of Revelations, while their Muslim opponents envision a world without dissension where all people will submit to the rule of Islam.[47]

On YouTube, militant atheists offer little respite from the vitriol that characterises dialogue between the faithful of different creeds. In 2007, a video by Nick Gisburne called 'Islamic teachings' (a detailed list of Quranic verses which the author perceived to be violent or intolerant) was put on YouTube, only to be quickly taken down by YouTube monitors after a litany of criticism from Muslim participants.[48] A viral campaign among other YouTube atheists, citing their freedom of speech, saw the video multiply to the extent that YouTube could no longer remove all copies and subsequently withdrew the initial ban. Other famous YouTube atheists, including Pat Condell (who now has his own channel on Richard Dawkins' website), 'TheAmazingAtheist', and 'CapnOAwesome', have put up their own venomously anti-religious videos. Among the most memorable was 'CapnOAwesome's 'Fuck Islam Week 2' where he stated; "and that free speech encompasses my desire to insult your fucktard, backward, cum-stained piece of shit of a religion".[49]

Interfaith dialogue as it is understood in the real world is looked upon poorly in the virtual community. A search for interfaith dialogue on YouTube's search engine yields a paltry 1,830 results, the overwhelming majority of which do not focus on anything that would be recognisable as "interfaith dialogue" in a real world sense.[50] The majority are music videos about religious faith, and the few that actually do focus on discussion between religious groups tend to concentrate on reconciliation between liberal Muslim, Christian, and Jewish groups.[51] In an ironic twist, the most popular video

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[46] 'AntiHypocrisy', 'Traditional Muslims vs. Liberal Muslims – The Roots of Conflict', *YouTube.com* (11 October 2007), at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cxej5bIkfo0. Accessed 23/12/09.

[47] 'tmalone10', 'Rapture, Antichrist, and Tribulation Period: What will it bring?', *YouTube.com* (4 August 2007), at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nnq5cQMiAB8. Accessed 23/12/09.

[48] Nick Gisburne, 'What Happened?', *Nick.Gisburne.com* (2007), at http://nick.gisburne.com/ngban1.php. Accessed 29/05/08.

[49] 'CapnOAwesome', 'Fuck Islam Week 2', *YouTube.com* (1 December 2007), at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kD1ZofbqGNY. Accessed 29/05/08.

[50] YouTube.com, '"Interfaith" Video Results', *YouTube.com*, at http://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=interfaith&search_type. Accessed 23/12/09.

[51] YouTube.com, '"Interfaith" Video Results'.

catalogued as "interfaith", with some 123,526 views in four months is entitled 'Michael Savage hates Muslims', which presents a radio broadcast from US conservative commentator, Michael ("Savage") Weiner, launching a tirade of abuse against American Muslims.[52] Similarly, commentary on the video in the comments section elicits attacks typical of YouTube interfaith discussions, with 'Belle19700' stating;

> I feel exactly the same as Savage. I don't want to see, hear, or know muslims exist. I am totally convinced that islam is pure evil, and going to try to wipe out Christianity one way or another. The sight and sound of these people makes me sick.[53]

'basak983' replies - "fucking cunts say that to my face see what happens to you aroogant [sic] fucker of america".[54]

The next most popular videos are simply music videos, while the first that would be considered interfaith dialogue, entitled, 'What is Real Love 1: A Sufi Perspective', is a video from a Vancouver-based interfaith group. While certainly more in tune with multicultural dialogue in the real world, with commentary such as - "because our God is the same, we're all brothers...love you all" from 'Rabbanisufi', this video only received 40,948 views in a year long period.[55]

The anonymity of the Internet, while a major reason for the success of YouTube, also makes the study of online communities very difficult. All "netizens" studied remain hidden behind a veil which means, ultimately, we can only assume the views they put forward are the ones they personally adhere to. 'VenomgFangX', 'Converted2Islam', 'CapnOAwesome', 'TheAmazingAtheist', and Pat Condell were willing to video themselves presenting, in doing so jettisoning some, but certainly not all, of their anonymity. The majority of YouTube participants, and the others in this study, do not reveal any information about their own identities. While this might raise questions about the empiricism of the study, any future methodology of the Internet will ultimately have to accept that the cyberworld does not adhere to the same rules as the real world, and cannot be approached in the same way.

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[52] 'bravenewfilms', 'Michael Savage hates Muslims', *YouTube.com* (17 January 2008), at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CtY-JWahHQs. Accessed 23/12/09.

[53] 'bravenewfilms', 'Michael Savage hates Muslims'.

[54] It would be typical to use the Latin phrase [sic] in order to denote misspelling or an unusual spelling. However, Internet terminology rarely conforms to the boundaries of real world acceptability, and rather than providing an endless list of '[sics]', it will be taken as granted that spelling mistakes used in quotations are recognised as part of the diversity of the online community.

[55] 'sufi92', 'What is Real Love 1 – A Sufi Perspective', *YouTube.com* (28 February 2007), at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZjPx_clZf7U. Accessed 23/12/09.

Ultimately, these are the online personas. Whether they are "true" in the real world is difficult to establish, but their primary impact is in a world where anonymity rules, and as such, what these people believe personally is irrelevant to what they present themselves as believing in the online community.

Theories of Multiculturalism, Anonymity, and the Internet

In order to explain the discrepancy between the kid-glove approach of real world ecumenism and the aggressive proselytising of the cyberworld, it is necessary to apply the notion of Internet anonymity to multicultural political correctness. As previously suggested, the Internet is a communication medium unique in history in that it is not only free from censorship, but it removes much of the danger of exposing an individual to criticism. Online personas are not real-world personas; offering staunch, even aggressive opinions that may be contrary to mainstream public opinion will not result in an individual being chastised for their beliefs. In the absence of the constraints of space, time, and circumstance, the Internet has erased age-old visual cues that can limit communication, leading to a situation that is solely a meeting of intellects.[56] The adherence of netizens to the ideas imbued in the First Amendment of the US constitution has created a situation where freedom of speech is often understood under the all-encompassing auspices of "anything goes".[57] The ability to remain anonymous only encourages participants to flout social mores in ways that that would see them risk legal action in the real world.[58] By comparison, real-world dialogue between faiths has a history going back to the early nineteenth century, with accepted terms of conduct and behaviour that reflect multicultural values and political and religious sensitivities.

Taking Martin Spencer's concept of political correctness as developing from an idea of the 'victim' and the 'victimizer', contemporary multiculturalism has encouraged a tendency to see the historical monotheisms, particularly Christianity, as the victimiser, and other faiths as the victim.[59] In order to redress the imbalance, a dialogue of compatibility, tolerance, and inclusiveness has emerged.[60] Frederick Gedicks suggests that the public world

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[56] Anne Wells Branscomb, 'Anon.ymity, Autonomy, and Accountability: Challenges to the First Amendment in Cyberspaces', *The Yale Law Journal,* vol.104, no.7 (May, 1995), p. 1641.

[57] Branscomb, 'Anon.ymity, Autonomy, and Accountability', p. 1641.

[58] Branscomb, 'Anon.ymity, Autonomy, and Accountability', p. 1642.

[59] Martin E. Spencer, 'Multiculturalism, "Political Correctness", and the Politics of Identity', *Sociological Forum,* vol. 9, no. 4 (1994), p. 559.

[60] Spencer, 'Multiculturalism, "Political Correctness", and the Politics of Identity', p. 559.

is perceived to require objectivity and reason.[61] Values and belief systems must be defended rationally or abandoned. As such, religion has been relegated to the private sphere, and when religion does communicate publically, irrational displays of hate or anger are simply no longer tolerated or accepted.[62] The secularisation of much of the world in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and the politics of harmony have emasculated the "hellfire and damnation" sermons of old. The recent furore over a growing schism within the Anglican church over the ordination of openly homosexual bishops is often touted in the media as an example of obstinate religious fanatics standing in the way of progress – yet the language used by those on both sides of the divide is positively peaceful in comparison to the hostility present on YouTube.[63] Polite ecumenism is not what most of the YouTube community wishes to see. So it seems that the belief of religious netizens is that multiculturalism has stifled their own beliefs, while YouTube provides an outlet for what they truly adhere to. While the interfaith dialogue is in the real world is, by its very nature, sanitised to remove all that could be deemed offensive to the participants, the Internet is raw and passionate.

Conclusion

Although the internet may have reshaped the nature of communication, it has not reshaped the dialogue between faiths. Instead, the internet has proved itself to be a breeding ground for the age-old belligerent and divisive kind of discussion that was so common in the centuries before the *fin de siècle,* and that the advocates of interfaith in the nineteenth century hoped to relegate to the pages of history. Instantaneous communication has encouraged users to forgo the process of critical reflection and self-analysis that has typified interfaith dialogue. Discussion between the religious users of YouTube has overwhelmingly rejected the multicultural consensus of the real world, relishing the anonymity of the medium, and using it once again as a platform to 'convert the heathen'. The cacophony of protests and cries of "freedom of speech" that result when YouTube censors attempt to take down videos which flout multicultural norms would indicate the extent to which these netizens have rally behind the cause of the US First amendment, using it as an excuse to legitimize any and every criticism. Such aggressive dialogue online then brings into question the extent to which real world interfaith reflects the reality of

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[61] Frederick Mark Gedicks, 'Public Life and Hostility to Religion', *Virginia Law Review,* vol. 78, no. 3 (1992), p. 675.

[62] Gedicks, 'Public Life and Hostility to Religion', p. 675.

[63] David Van Biema, 'Gay Bishop vs. Straight Bishop', *Time Magazine* (7 June 2008), at http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1812623,00.html. Accessed 23/12/09.

believers' opinions, and indeed, the future direction of interfaith relations. Those seeking to continue in the footsteps of Swami Vivekananda must ultimately decide whether the internet's cyber-crusaders reflect the opinions of a vocal minority, while the silent majority continues to hope for understanding, or alternatively, whether YouTube's inhabitants are truly something to worry about.