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1 Introduction
Religious Interaction Online

A brisk spring night in 2014, I attended a debate between a Christian and a Muslim, held at a local Islamic center in the UK, in Perry Barr in Birmingham. The event featured Shabir Ally, a Canadian Islamic Studies lecturer and host of the Canadian public access TV show *Let the Quran Speak*. On the show, Ally is interviewed by a young woman in a *hijab* – headscarf – and answers questions about Islam and Muslim practice in Canada. The videos are posted regularly, with a range of topics and guest hosts through the year.

Ally looks the part of a Muslim scholar, dressed in a *thobe* and *taqiyah* – the traditional Muslim male robe and hat – with an impressive white beard. His accent is distinctly Canadian, and Ally in many ways embodies the image of the so-called moderate Muslim. He is pious and learned, while also being practical. He is pragmatic without appearing liberal, and he takes positions in a reasoned, understanding way, always displaying a careful consideration of context and how Islam should be practiced in Canada.

While *Let the Quran Speak* is shown on terrestrial television in Canada, the packed room in Birmingham knew Ally from YouTube, where his show and videos of his lectures and debates regularly appear. He is a kind of micro-celebrity, "Internet famous" among a very specific group of people. In YouTube videos, Ally can be viewed debating Christian fundamentalists in a variety of different settings before friendly and hostile audiences. In Birmingham, the audience was decidedly friendly. Ally debated a Seventh-Day Adventist representing Christianity, but the actual opponent seemed to be irrelevant: the group of people who had gathered were there to see Ally. The night was structured to allow Ally to speak about the supremacy of Islam over Christianity, and the Qur'an over the Bible, while listening politely to the Seventh-Day Adventist.

The debate was held in a small studio, set up to film the debate, with lights on the two lecterns. The room filled up with young men, mostly Southeast Asian and Muslim, with only a few women and one family with small children. I found a seat near the edge and waited for the event to begin, wondering how badly I stood out as the one white American academic in jeans and a sport coat. A young man wearing a *thobe* and a parka came and sat

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next to me, introducing himself. He settled into his seat and after checking his phone, asked whom I had come to support. I awkwardly tried to explain my position, that I wasn't supporting anyone – I had just come to listen. He nodded understandingly and turned to his phone, which he was using to read YouTube comments.

When Ally arrived, he was whisked to the front of the room as everyone looked on expectantly. His opposition was a middle-aged black man who was clearly not a religious scholar – he lectured at a local university, but in information science and was missing the prominent "PhD" after his name that Ally had. The man seemed understandably uncomfortable in a room that, though respectful, was unsympathetic to him. The debate went on cordially, with the Seventh-Day Adventist making classic apologetic arguments about the nature of Jesus – *was he a liar*, *lunatic*, *or might he have actually been God*? – while Ally held up different books, dismantling arguments about the reliability of the Bible and the deity of Christ.

The formal debate ended and there was time for an open discussion. A long queue quickly formed at a microphone with men who asked pointed and leading questions of the Seventh-Day Adventist, trying to trip him up on contradictions in the Bible. After the questions, and once the organizers thanked everyone for coming, a crowd formed around Ally. People took photos with him, giving congratulatory pats on the back, while largely ignoring the Seventh-Day Adventist. When the debate attendees finally filed out of the studio, happily chatting and checking their smartphones, it was clear that the debate had served its purpose, but it was not clear if there had actually been a meaningful discussion between both sides.

Ally's popularity among a Muslim community in Birmingham was in part the result of social media, of YouTube, and the spread of his videos by fans. In a small way, the debate shows how technological advances have given people of faith unprecedented access to new voices across the globe. In a utopian model of the Internet, this access also affords the presences of dissenting opinions, challenging users to reconsider their positions in light of new evidence. The debate in Birmingham, however, showed that access does not always translate into significant engagement. The arguments both men made about the existence of God or gods, and whose God was the real God, stubbornly followed the same pattern as they have for more than a thousand years. The Internet may have had an effect on the medium of transmitting these arguments, but the extent to which the arguments themselves have been transformed is still an open question. For scholars attempting to understand and place this interaction in a historical context, the complex interaction between the online and offline worlds presents new challenges for describing how social interaction develops. The global arguments about faith become local and situated, and when filmed and posted on YouTube they contribute to

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larger global trends. Social media and mobile technology increasingly marry the offline and online contexts, creating new ways of interacting.

1.1 The Internet

In the early twenty-first century, the Internet has become a key site for social interaction. Mediated communication now occurs regularly on social media sites like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. While early research on Internet interaction focused on anonymity and its negative effects (Kiesler, Siegel, and McGuire, 1984; Siegel, Dubrovsky, Kiesler, and McGuire, 1986) has remained influential in computer-mediated computer (CMC) research, social media sites have facilitated meaningful connections between named users, often showing their faces and using their real names. Social media connections can grow into a real sense of intimacy even while users are separated by time and space (Wesch, 2009). The Internet, however, has changed substantially since the 1990s when people first started becoming aware of it. To understand and analyze interaction online at a particular point in time – in this book, interaction on social media as it existed in 2014 – we must first take a historical perspective on the development of the Internet.

In a material sense, the Internet is a network of computers and servers sharing information in geographically remote places (Herring, 2003) and the use of the Internet can be seen in tandem with the development of technology in three phases. In the first phase, the Internet was used primarily as a way to access information and communicate using messaging tools like email or Internet Communication Relay (ICR) (Herring, 2003). In the second phase of development, often called "Web 2.0," users took a much more active role in the production of content (Herring, 2004b). Web 2.0 included the rise of social network sites (SNS), which allow individuals to:

(1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system,
(2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and
(3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. (boyd and Ellison, 2007, p. 211)

These include sites starting with MySpace and eventually overtaken in popularity by Facebook. Twitter and YouTube can also be included here, as users were both producers and consumers of content, and "friends," "followers," and "subscribers" are used to describe connections among users in these different sites. These "connections" are not the same as online "communities," but rather a technical description of who users can access and what they are able to see or not see on other users' profile pages.

In the third phase, mobile technology has brought the Internet into the day-to-day lived experience of users, particularly young people, and the idea of

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"going online," where a user would sit at a computer and interact with others apart from their physical environment, evidenced in Facebook's shift to a mobile app from a previous focus as a desktop based website (Baron, 2008; Goggin, 2014). Mobile technology means content sharing can happen in real time, with apps on smartphones allowing users to "check-in" to physical locations and increase interaction between users' physical and online presences (Gordon and e Silva, 2011; Wilken, 2014). Although SNS were developed prior to the launch of the first iPhone in 2007, their development as key sites for social interaction has increased dramatically. They bred numerous other sites and applications that build on the notions of social connection in online space.

As social network sites, YouTube and Facebook have persisted as central places of interaction, with Facebook having over a billion users by its tenth anniversary in 2014 and more than 500 million users accessing the site via mobile phones at the same time (Sedghi, 2014). Similarly, YouTube also retained an important staying power through the transition from Web 2.0 to the era of mobile Internet. Users may not necessarily be active in YouTube communities (either by making their own videos or commenting on others), but with over a billion users and more than half of the views coming from mobile technologies (YouTube, 2016), YouTube is a central site of media consumption. Furthermore, both YouTube (owned by Google) and Facebook cannot now be seen only as online platforms, but important global economic forces with far-reaching consequences. Mark Zuckerberg, the founder of Facebook, has often attracted criticism for his views of privacy online and how Facebook encourages the presentation of personal information in public spaces, with Zuckerburg famously pronouncing the end of the age of privacy as a social norm in 2010 (Barnett, 2010). As a dominant force both socially and economically, Facebook's decisions have effects well beyond their own platforms. Their corporate decisions made about privacy, copyright, and security affect the way the Internet continues to develop, not only as a site for social interaction, but also with political influence on how people come to think about privacy and surveillance (Fuchs, 2012).

The openness of social media has created a new kind of "networked publics" (boyd, 2011) in which users can publicly view others' interaction and online presence across a variety of new media platforms. This presents unique opportunities for a broad range of users – from television evangelists to users with no viewers – to post their videos and present their worldviews in a variety of different places, with the nominal notion that anyone can view their content and potentially be influenced it. However, the ability to access material is not a promise that it will be accessed, and although users can have access to a variety of voices and perspectives, there is evidence that users do not necessarily seek out alternative perspectives for the purposes of widening their

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own horizons. Instead, evidence suggests that social media can result in an opposite effect, causing users to become more entrenched in their beliefs and avoid dissenting voices (Heatherly, Lu, and Lee, 2016). Users can curate their own pages and friend groups on Facebook, sorting out disagreeable information and opinions in a so-called filter bubble (Pariser, 2011), and becoming more inclined toward ideological messages to which they are already predisposed.

The public nature of some social media interaction also creates another complication, as the multiple identities that users have are often awkwardly forced into the same online space, like Facebook, where a user might be "friends" with a range of users including their family, co-workers, and "offline" friends. Marwick and boyd (2011) have described this as "context collapse," where users must maintain authenticity to a variety of different audiences at the same time, often being unsure of who their audience actually is. This creates difficulties especially for users who are specifically interested in highlighting a religious identity online, and are attempting to spread their faith to others. Users might portray authentic religious identities which are recognizable to the faithful within their own community, but also appeal to and are oriented toward the beliefs and identities of the people they are attempting to reach. Moreover, they must also protect against users who are openly antagonistic to them and their beliefs and who might actively attempt to derail them and their message.

Social media provides the medium for interaction analyzed in this book, but the Internet is only the latest iteration in a long line of technologies that have affected how human-to-human interaction is mediated generally, and how religious faith is practiced more specifically. While the Internet is often viewed as revolutionary, its effect on social interaction and development must be considered as one of many technologies that have had a remarkable effect on society and religious practice, such as the printing press and the radio. Moreover, the interaction between people of different faiths does not appear for the first time with the invention of the Internet: they often have long histories that embed in them long-standing disagreements. The histories of contact among Christians, Muslims, and atheists are the foundation for religious talk online.

1.2 Outreach and Dialogue in a Historical Context

Interaction among people of different faiths is often entangled in larger political, ethnic, and cultural themes (Goddard, 2000; Watt, 2013), with categories like "Christianity," "Islam," and "atheism" all having their own complex histories, doctrinal differences, and strands. Evangelical movements within the religious traditions of Christianity and Islam are as old as the traditions themselves and necessarily a part of these complex histories of

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interaction. Understanding evangelism and interaction among people of different faiths on social media then requires understanding of how interaction fits broadly into a larger history of "evangelical" movements. The interactions among these traditions in some cases have been long-standing, particularly Christians and Muslims (Goddard, 2000; Lewis, 1993). While users on social media might not be aware of the how Muslims and Christians have interacted over the years, the history is profoundly important in how users talk about and conceptualize others when presenting their own beliefs. To understand what motivates people to take particular positions, we first need to go back to the origins of evangelism in each tradition and the historic interaction between groups.

Evangelism in Christianity has its roots in the biblical teaching of Jesus himself, who is reported to have said to his disciples, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation" (Mark 16:15, New International Version). This injunction is then followed up in the Acts of the Apostles with a description of his disciples being "filled with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:4) and preaching the message of Jesus to the Jewish community in Jerusalem. The New Testament also deals with some difficult issues of inter-religious dialogue, as the Apostle Paul's writing in particular worked to explain the emerging theology of Christianity in light of the Jewish context (Renard, 2011). The context of early faith, as it is today, was one of mixed religious communities and voices.

The injunction from Jesus himself to spread the message of the gospel to "all the world" led quickly to missionary activity to non-Jewish communities with the preaching and ministry of the Apostle Paul. Paul's message, while initially oriented to Jewish audiences, grew broadly throughout his ministry. Both his own letters to Christian believers and narratives about his ministry in the Acts of the Apostles focus on an explicit interaction with both the theologies and believers of other faiths beyond Judaism. Most strikingly, this included a direct attempt to explain Christian belief using the faith of the Greeks, for example, in his preaching at the meeting of the Areopagus in Athens. The story, related in the Acts of the Apostles, describes Paul preaching the message of Jesus specifically to believers in a foreign religion by addressing an altar for an "unknown god" he sees in Athens (Acts 17).

With the conversion of Constantine, Christianity became inextricably linked to secular rule (Renard, 2011) and discussion of Christian missionary endeavors have been deeply embedded in political movements. Still, the notion of Christian missionary work as "spreading the gospel" without an explicit commitment to political goals also has a long and extensive history, developing from the practice of the disciples through to the present day. Christian missions by the Catholic Church have often included other endeavors beyond simple religious teaching like education and charity work,

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creating a spread not only of Christian theology, but a framework of socio-political ideologies with it (see Neill, 1964). Under the British Empire, the spread of Christianity was tied to colonialism, which used religion explicitly for political aims (Renard, 2011) and had important consequences particularly when considering interaction between Christians and Muslims. Most recently, Christian missions have been centered in the United States and made a more active and public attempt at self-reflection, but missionary endeavors remain embedded in the theological and political ideologies of the cultures sending missionaries (Yates, 1996). Because of the prominence of American Christianity in the development of missions, American Evangelical ideology, rooted in notions of the Protestant work ethic (Weber, 2002 [1905]) and individual responsibility, is also tacitly spread in missionary endeavors.

The history of Islam charts a different path from Christianity, given the difference in constitution between the two religions. Christianity was co-opted by the Roman Empire following its theological development, while Islam developed simultaneously as a political and theological system (Hick, 1991). Islam, like Christianity, appeared in a context of other religious belief systems but unlike Jesus Christ or the Apostle Paul in Christianity, the Prophet Muhammad served as both a political and religious leader. Moreover, the development of Islamic theology saw continuity through the prophets, rather than a reinterpretation of a sacred text (Renard, 2011). These differences mean a comparison between Christianity and Islam is not straightforward, particularly when it comes to considering how both traditions have approached the spread of their messages. Although there is a belief in the West that Islam was spread initially "by the sword," Renard (2011) points out the fallacy in thinking that Muslim forces acted primarily on religious motivations. Islam does indeed have a distinct notion of the teaching and sharing of the faith, known as *dawah*. Dawah (or da'wa or da'wah) literally means "call" and like Christianity was historically tied to commercial endeavors or military conquests. It was "the function of the caliph [political-military ruler of Muslim community], extending authority over Muslims outside Islamic lands and promoting Islamic unity" (Esposito, 2003). However, as Bijlefeld (1995) points out, although dawah in Islam and mission in Christianity are significantly different, they can come to refer to the same realities – the notion that it is the responsibility of individual Muslims to share their faith through deeds and words, with the goal of propagating the religion (Poston, 1992). This is particularly true of the use of "dawah" among the people in this book, who treat dawah in similar ways to Christian evangelical outreach.

The historical relationship between evangelism and conquest means the interaction between Christians and Muslims has long been tied to political

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endeavors and has had a long and often violent history (Goddard, 2000). It is impossible to fully understand dialogue among Christians and Muslims without first understanding the influence of the Crusades in the Middle Ages and later of colonialism on how both groups have viewed one another (Ernst, 2004). Distinguishing violent interaction driven by primarily political interests from missionary activity with explicit theological goals is a difficult task. Ernst (2004) argues interaction between Western Christianity and Islam was, until the very recent past, marked by a gross misunderstanding of Islam by Western Christians (who often knew little Arabic) and deeply embedded in racist narratives. With first British and then American colonizers at the front line of interaction between Western Christianity and Islam, interaction between the religions became entangled with political positions and suspicion of Islam in the West.

This animosity and misunderstanding is, however, only part of the history of interaction among Christians and Muslims. There is also a long tradition of dialogue and argument among scholars in the faith traditions (Watt, 2013), and currents trends in debates like the one between Shabir Ally and the Seventh-Day Adventist do have clear historical precedence. Moreover, the themes and topics of these discussions often highlight differences in the views of each other's faith as well as differences in the theology of each belief system. From an Islamic perspective, Christianity, Judaism, and Islam all share a common Abrahamic ancestry, with roots in monotheism. Shafaat (1991) describes this "Abrahamic ummah," a multi-faith community that existed in Medina with a shared history and belief. From the Muslim perspective, the mistake in Christianity is not the presence of the figure of Jesus, who is also revered and respected in Islam, but rather the belief that Jesus is also God, which Islam views as idolatry (Solomon, 1991). The fault is not with the basic belief in God and his revelation to humankind, but rather the corruption of the original message of Jesus through retelling and translation. In a similar way that Christians view Jesus as the culmination of Jewish scriptures, Muslims view Muhammad and the revelation of the Qur'an as a fulfillment of the revelation of God to Christians and Jews by the Prophets (Kerr, 1991).

Historically, the Christian perspective on Islam has been decidedly more negative, with criticism focusing on Muhammad's military exploits and his marriages (Ernst, 2004). Ernst highlights the roots of these criticisms in traditional Christian views on celibacy and nonviolence, which have been seen as hallmarks of Jesus's own exalted nature, which set him apart from other prophets and humans. For Christian apologists, Muhammad is not a Prophet, but a kind of political leader driven by personal ambition and his own physical desire, while disregarding the political and cultural conditions of Muhammad's life, and playing into ongoing racist stereotypes of Muslims which marked early Christian interactions with Islam. Christian Evangelicals interested in

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“reaching” the Muslim world with the gospel and who see Muslims as potential target for missionary endeavors have increasingly recognized the colonial and historical negativity of previous attempts at converting the Muslim world, arguing that it is a potential obstacle for outreach (Parshall, 2003).

These criticisms also highlight theological differences in how Christians and Muslims view Jesus Christ and Muhammad. Christian arguments against Islam can focus on how Muhammad is not like Jesus, but this criticism misses the key difference between Islam and Christianity. Whereas Christians view Jesus as the revelation of God to humans, and indeed, as God himself, Muslims view Jesus as a “son of God,” to be revered and respected as a pious human, but not as God himself (Ayoub, 1995). In Islam, Muhammad is not seen as God, but as a messenger of God, a prophet to whom God revealed himself. This has, of course, important theological implications for Muslims, particularly in comparison to Christian belief about Jesus. While Muhammad is deeply respected and revered as a prophet, he is not to be worshipped. His humanity and distinction from God is reinforced in the *shahada*, or the Muslim profession of faith, translated in English as: “There is no god but God. Muhammad is the messenger of God.” This contrasts considerably with the common belief espoused by Christians in the Nicene Creed, a common profession of faith among Christians, which claims Jesus to be “very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father.” For a Christian focused primarily on the divine nature of Jesus Christ, Muhammad’s humanity necessarily results in a lower status.

This background on Christian-Muslim interaction and beliefs is certainly not intended to be comprehensive, but rather to lay a historical groundwork for the interaction between Christians and Muslims online. As with many phenomena on the Internet, very little is actually new, particularly in terms of theological arguments. The histories of these interactions are indeed important for understanding how people of faith and no faith understand their own positions and responsibilities in “sharing” what they believe with others and attempting to convert others. The arguments, however, go back for many centuries, with users often drawing implicitly on the storylines that are available to them about the other. At the same time, social media and the Internet force a need to rethink how the collapse of space affects the ways in which discourses can be challenged directly by those about whom one is speaking.

Despite the key differences between Islam and Christianity, the two share more in common with each other than they do with atheism, defined here as a disbelief in the existence of a God or gods. In the first instance, “atheism” is not a belief, but a lack of belief. Although there is a long history of movements which include atheism, like secular humanism, in the West, progressive secularist movements have been notably focused on positive claims that favor

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"naturalistic and scientific thought over supernatural explanations of reality" (Cimino and Smith, 2007, p. 408). While secularism took hold in Europe in the twentieth century, Cimino and Smith (2011) note the resistance to secularism in the American context. Despite a significant growth in the number of people identifying as "atheist" or "agnostic" in the early 2000s, the number of atheists in America in 2014 was still well under five percent (Lipka, 2015).

In unpacking what it means to be an "atheist," LeDrew (2012) sees a distinction between "scientific atheism" and "humanistic atheism." The trajectories of these two forms of atheism are, LeDrew (2012) argues, independent with different focuses. Scientific atheism includes "non-believers [who have] focused their engagement with religion on science, explanation and knowledge vs. ignorance" while humanist atheism focuses on "religion as a social phenomenon and a symptom of alienation and oppression" (p. 71). LeDrew (2012) goes on to say,

> The distinction between scientific atheism and humanistic atheism is thus necessary because the term "atheism" does not precisely identify the nature of the epistemological and political orientations that characterize various formations of non-belief, as "atheism" is ordinarily defined in terms of a position on nature . . . rather than in terms of humanist philosophy or a sociological position. (p. 71)

This description of atheism sees it in two ways: first, as an approach to how knowledge should be gained and tested; and second, as a way to respond to injustice and oppression.

Though it may be possible and useful to distinguish between these categories, the lived experience of atheists in narrative research (see for example, Cimino and Smith, 2011; LeDrew, 2013; Smith, 2011, 2013; Smith and Cimino, 2012) suggests that atheists do not necessarily experience this distinction in a meaningful way and there is evidence that features of both can be prominent in the videos of atheists on social media. Indeed, LeDrew (2012) points out that though the scientific approach may be dominant among scholars like Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett, there is still tension with a humanist approach and the relationship between the two should be further investigated as they develop. Richard Dawkins, for example, is both a scientist and prominent antagonist of religion.

Attempting to track a history of dialogue between faith communities and atheism is a difficult task for several reasons. First, although there has been a presence of atheism in America (where YouTube and Facebook have developed) in the context of secular humanism, atheist and secular institutions like the American Atheists have had only modest membership and influence (Cimino and Smith, 2007). Until recently, atheism has simply not had a serious presence in the culture. Second, the very concept of so-called New Atheism suggests a contemporary social movement tied to atheistic belief and having roots in the world of social media (Cimino and Smith, 2011; Taylor, 2006, December/January). It may be possible to trace the ideology informing the

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