

## HOW FUNNY CAN ISLAM CONTROVERSIES BE?

### COMEDIANS DEFENDING THEIR FAITHS ON YOUTUBE

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Keywords: humor, dialogue, Fitna, Islam, YouTube

Word count: 6846

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Published as:

Hirzalla, F., van Zoonen, L., & Müller, F. (2013). How Funny Can Islam Controversies Be? Comedians Defending Their Faiths on YouTube. *Television & New Media*, 14(1), 46-61.

Abstract:

In this contribution, we analyse whether humor can release some of the tension in Islam controversies and open up new directions for dialogue. We examine two popular comic video blogs ('vlogs') on YouTube responding to the anti-Islam video *Fitna*. Through content analyses we depict the dividing and uniting features of the humor performed in these vlogs as well as the sentiments they evoked among their viewers. Our data indicate that in one vlog, the comedy calls for interreligious acceptance, while in the other vlog comedy is used to 'other' Islam and Muslims. The comments on both vlogs, however, comprise negative and positive sentiment in the same patterns, often expressed in an antagonistic style. These findings call for caution when contemplating the potential of humor to alleviate interreligious tensions and the prospect of the internet to form a space for meaningful democratic deliberation, especially when dealing with topics as controversial as Islam.

## **Introduction**

Controversies about Islam entail some of the most enraged conflicts and debates in today's world. The list is long and diverse, including the Muhammad cartoons and Fitna video, and the widespread street and diplomatic protests against them; the Swiss and French clashes about Islamic architecture and dress, and the resulting bans on – respectively – building new minarets and wearing face covering veils in public space; the proposal for a 'Burn the Quran Day' in the US or the anger about the plans for a 'Ground Zero Mosque' in New York. Evidently, such disputes acquire extra meaning against the backdrop of the attacks by Al Qaida units on New York, Madrid and London, which enhances the strong emotional investments that Muslims and non-Muslims have in these issues. As a result, public debate about Islam tends to be antagonistic and solemn, also because all sides feel their core religious and cultural values are at stake.

While in many conflicts moments of comic relief have been shown to release tension and open up possibilities for solutions (Morreall, 2009), in Islam controversies humorous tones seem hard to find, regardless whether one looks in the news genres of print, broadcast and internet media. Right after 9/11, many Americans considered humor indeed offensive. Kuipers (2005, p. 72) observes that ‘the general sentiment was that humor was inappropriate and laughter was impossible in times of such shock.’ She also demonstrates, however, that internet jokes, especially in the form of visual bricolage, appeared almost immediately, not so much to provide comic relief, but rather to air hostility towards Bin Laden and to criticize the abundance of disaster images and larmoyant comments in the mass media. Evidently, there was humorous response to 9/11, but hidden in the semi-private spaces of the web.

In this contribution, we engage in an empirically informed discussion of the articulation of conflict, Islam and humor, in order to find out whether humor can release tension in Islam controversies and open up new directions for dialogue. We zoom in on two immensely popular comical video blogs (or ‘vlogs’) responding to the anti-Islam movie *Fitna*. This film is a 16 minute visual rant released in March 2008 and made by Geert Wilders, a Dutch Member of Parliament. It evoked massive street protests, produced intense debates about freedom of speech, and encouraged people from across the globe to create and upload their own visualized opinion on YouTube. Some 1500 unique videos were uploaded in reaction to *Fitna*, which together drew over 10 million viewers (Van Zoonen et al., 2010).

The two most popular vlogs, in terms of number of views, were stand-up comedies. One was made by the American Muslim and film maker Murad Aldin Amayreh for the New Jersey chapter of the Muslim American Society, and features writer Mustafa Gatollari, defending himself and Islam. This two minute stand-up routine was made before *Fitna*’s release, but it was re-uploaded by many people in response to the movie, carrying a tag like ‘Fitna’ or ‘Wilders’. At the moment of writing, it had drawn over 4.4 million views.<sup>1</sup> The second stand-up, *The religion of fear*, drew over 1.5 million views. Made by the British anti-religious satirist Pat Condell in direct response to *Fitna*, it attacked Islam for its alleged violent nature.<sup>2</sup> Condell introduces himself on his website as a maker of ‘godless

comedy': 'Hi, I'm Pat Condell. I don't respect your beliefs and I don't care if you are offended. Cheers.'<sup>23</sup>

We will analyse the nature of the humor in these two vlogs and the sentiments they evoked among their viewers. But first, we will discuss in more detail how humor can be articulated with theories of interreligious dialogue, democratic deliberation. These two angles provide the most relevant framework to study the articulation of conflict, Islam and humor, because both have been developed to understand and contribute to the collective and individual management of religious and political diversity, an aim we wish to pursue with our own research as well.

### **Dialogue, deliberation and humor**

Theories of interreligious dialogue and democratic deliberation share a normative agenda aimed at understanding and improving the quality of people's interactions. In the context of interreligious dialogue such interactions concern people's faiths, whereas in the context of democratic deliberation they involve their politics. In both cases, contemporary religious and cultural diversity have increased the need to consider such engagements with 'others' in peaceful and constructive ways, and scholars in this area have therefore not only focused on describing and analysing these interactions, but also on developing guidelines and prescriptions for real life situations.

Allison Jaggar, a political theorist, asks, for instance, 'how cultural heterogeneity may be compatible with social stability and civic solidarity' (2000, p. 27) and suggests that three virtues are key: multicultural literacy, that is, a willingness and capacity to recognize the experiences and self-conception of others; moral deference, which entails assuming and weighing the credibility of others, especially if they come from subordinated groups; and emotional reconfiguration in the sense that the pain of others is witnessed, acknowledged and responded to. From a faith perspective, Miroslav Volf, a theologian, comes to a similar understanding when he identifies a need to embrace 'the will to give ourselves to others and "welcome" them, to readjust our identities to make space for them, prior to any judgment about others, except that of identifying them in their identity'(1996, p. 29).

The literature in both fields is immense and beyond the scope of this paper to discuss. It is, however, important to note that in this body of literature there is little to no attention for humor. In fact, humor, together with other ‘unreasonable’ factors like anger, frustration, fear or joy, is usually considered at odds with dialogue and deliberation (Johnson, 1998), although it has been welcomed as a means to improve a productive group atmosphere (Mansbridge et al., 2006) and it has been claimed that a sense of humor is a quality of intermediaries (Abu-Nimer, 2001).

Yet, among the many functions that are ascribed to humor, there are some that are directly relevant to dialogue and deliberation. Miczo and Welter (2006), for instance, distinguish between aggressive and affiliative humor and demonstrate that they correlate, respectively, negatively and positively with the appreciation of intercultural communication. Meyer’s (2000) analysis of sources and functions of humor provides the most extensive and helpful treatment for our contribution. He discusses three basic humor theories that answer the question as to why something is funny: because it relaxes tensions (relief), because it points to anomalies (incongruence), and because it establishes superiority. Humor based on relief from tensions, Meyer argues, produces identification between maker and audience. Incongruity as a source of humor serves to clarify positions, but may also differentiate audiences. The enforcement of established norm is the last function in Meyer’s taxonomy. He concludes that identification and clarification are functions of humor that are capable of uniting people, whereas differentiation and enforcement tend to have divisive effects.

In this article, we will use Meyer’s model of humor sources and functions to examine the two most popular vlogs that were upload on YouTube in response to Wilders’ movie *Fitna*. Two outcomes of earlier analyses of video responses to *Fitna* are relevant to the case study at hand. First, it was found that the response videos generally conveyed messages that were either strongly critical of *Fitna* or supportive of the movie and its anti-Islam message. Videos with more hybrid messages were scarcely present (Van Zoonen et al., 2009). A subsequent study, focussing on the nature of comments on videos responding to *Fitna*, found that YouTube communications surrounding the movie were generally similarly polarized, with antagonistic or agonistic comments that commonly did not respond

to other comments and thus did not produce substantial dialogue between either like-minded or opponents (Van Zoonen et al., forthcoming).

These and similar findings of other studies about online discussions (e.g., Strandberg, 2002; Hagemann, 2008) conflict in evident ways with the bulk of literature focussing on the internet as a sphere where people might come together to meaningfully express and discuss their perspectives, grievances and disparities (Graham, 2009; Witschge, 2007), making the question as to whether humor can make a difference online, as might be expected on the basis of humor theory, even more pertinent. Can humoristic vlogs evoke a less hostile communicative space that meets the norms – such as reciprocity, reflexivity, and empathy – of meaningful and constructive dialogue?

This question calls for further empirical scrutiny. First, building on Meyer's (2000) model of humor functions, we will investigate the humor genres employed in *The religion of fear* and *I am a Muslim*, the two comedy vlogs on YouTube responding to *Fitna*. This enables us to depict the vlogs' potential to unify and/or polarize by evoking dialogue based on identification and clarification, or differentiation and enforcement respectively. Second, we will ask whether and how the comments evoked by the vlogs were positive (supportive) or negative (critical) qua sentimental tone, form and substance. One would expect that for constructive dialogue or deliberation to be possible, a positive sentiment is a prerequisite in creating the communicative environment wherein people would be willing to acknowledge and reflect on views different than their own.

## **Method**

*Analysis of the vlogs.* The vlogs studied here, *The religion of fear* and *I am a Muslim*, have the form of a 'testimonial', a video genre containing monologues of uploaders who walk around or sit down and appear as 'talking heads' on the screen (Van Zoonen et al., 2009). A semiotic and discursive analysis was conducted to explore whether and how the humor in the vlogs invited audiences response in the four ways that Meyer (2000) identifies: identification, clarification, differentiation, and enforcement. Although humor depends on interpretation and context, Meyer suggest that the humor functions can

still be distinguished on a general level. For instance, self-deprecating humor can realize identification and create an equal relation between audience and speaker. Clarification, he continuous, can especially be served by plays on words, whereas enforcement often involves laughing at, rather than with someone. Differentiation, finally, involves contrasting oneself with an opponent often in the form of comic ridicule, the 'harshes function of humor' (p. 322). Written, verbal, visual and auditive cues were taken into account as signs that potentially compose the performance of these humor genres. These cues were explored and categorized by carefully and repeatedly viewing the vlogs. Building on Halliday's (1994) functional grammar, different parts of the vlogs were subsequently submitted to in-depth analyses of their ideational meanings (representing what the world is and who we are), interpersonal meanings (regarding relationships between speaker and listener), and textual meanings (i.e., how text is structured and socially embedded) (see also: Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996).

*Analysis of the comments.* Condell's video, *The religion of fear*, video evoked over 31,000 responses by users, while more than half a million comments were posted in response to *I am a Muslim*.<sup>4</sup> These numbers make any kind of overall analysis impossible. We therefore selected the last 1000 comments to each vlog, thus 2000 comments in total, as a sample for an in-depth case study. We used the software program LexiURL Searcher to automatically select and download these responses (Thelwall, 2011). The comments analysis starts with a general overview of the presence of positive and negative 'sentiments'. The term 'sentiment' is used here rather than 'emotion', since, in the literature, the former term refers to 'affect split into positive, negative and neutral whereas the term emotion refers to more differentiated affect (e.g., happy, sad, frightened)', as Thelwall et al. (2010, p. 2545) note. The overview of sentiments was produced with the software program SentiStrength, which follows an automated, quantitative coding logic aimed at measuring the strength of positive and negative sentiments in written text, including emoticons and non-standard spellings. Positive and negative sentiments are detected through a large set of algorithms, on the basis of a database with terms associated with positive or negative sentiment (ibid.). Since Sentiment Analysis indicates *whether* sentiments are positive or negative, and not *how* these sentiments are specifically constructed, or what they refer to,

we subsequently investigated the comments by a qualitative, inductive content analysis aimed at exhaustive categorization of the variations in topics addressed by the comments. These variations were coded and analyzed systematically through the Constant Comparative Method in the CAQDAS program MaxQDA (Boeije, 2002). This procedure, focussing again on the construction of ideational, interpersonal and textual meanings (Halliday, 1994; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996), yielded detailed insights into which issues users discussed and how they discussed the various issues.

## **The vlogs**

### *The religion of fear*

Pat Condell's video only displays his head and shoulders, as figure 1 shows, against a plain, greyish background. The vlog does not contain any background sounds; only the voice of Condell can be heard. Throughout the vlog, however, Condell looks from up close straight into a camera, constructing an 'in-your-face' experience of his message, and violating the intimate space of the audience; in real life, we would not allow strangers to come this close.

Figure 1: The religion of fear



Speaking swiftly, Condell begins with commenting on the lack of support Fitna has received, especially from ‘politicians’, and the ‘violent’ nature of Islam.

What happened to all those people who keep telling us ‘I don’t agree with what you say, but I’ll defend your right to say it?’ (...) No shortage of politicians, however, lining up to accuse the film of falsely equating Islam with violence, which is a bit like falsely equating Walt Disney with Mickey Mouse.

The quote illustrates the kind of humor, created through unexpected and creative incongruence, that is characteristic for Condell’s vlog. Above, Condell plays on the relation between Walt Disney and Mickey Mouse. Since Disney is the creator of Mickey Mouse, it is discordant and therefore potentially humorous to ‘falsely’ equate the two. Condell uses this humor to characterize the supposed inseparability of Islam and violence. Islam and violence, Condell suggests, are two of a kind, and cannot be ‘falsely’ equated; they are as indivisible as Disney and Mickey Mouse. In other parts of the vlog too, Condell uses comedic incongruence to depict Islam as a violent religion.

Islam without violence (!) is a like an egg-free omelette. The religion is predicated on violence (!) and the threat of violence (!). It’s a religion of peace in the same way North Korea is a people’s democratic republic. But we’re not allowed to say that, because when we do, we’ll be threatened with violence (!).

Since Islam is ‘predicated on violence’, the excerpt suggests that Islam poses the ‘threat of violence’ to a group Condell calls ‘we’. He uses pronunciative techniques to prop this narrative, particularly to accentuate Islam’s alleged violent nature. When he mentions the term ‘violence’, he stresses its first syllable and pauses a fraction of a second before pronouncing it. By applying this technique repeatedly within a short text, as is the case in the quote above (see exclamation marks), Condell achieves focalization of the term ‘violence’ and advances its association with Islam. This storyline and the remainder of the vlog as well rely on a dichotomous opposition between a rather monolithic ‘us’ and ‘them’.

It was the threat of Muslim violence that caused the Dutch government to grovel in such abject dhimmitude and to run around apologizing like headless chickens. A spectacle which I’m sure many Muslims enjoyed, and why shouldn’t *they* enjoy it? After all, it sends out the clear message to the entire Muslim world that, in Europe, *we* won’t stand up for what *we* believe in. [italics by authors]

The remainder of the vlog is sometimes humorous by the kind of verbal incongruity illustrated earlier, and throughout performed visually in-your-face, through a narration style that is sneering and antagonistic. Condell claims persistently that ‘we’ have responded too softly to Islam, and condemns Islam for suffering from a large set of ‘phobias’, such as ‘fear of freedom’, ‘fear of being ridiculed’, ‘and the biggest fear of all of course, fear of women.’ At the end, Condell denounces Islam again, concluding that it is ‘a violent, seventh century desert dogma that wants to take over the world, remove our freedom, subjugate women, brainwash children, persecute Jews and homosexuals’, and then closes his testimonial by saying that ‘all we can do is make excuses for it for fear of causing offence.’

In sum, by humor based on incongruence (alongside pronunciative techniques), Condell crafts the term ‘violence’ as the centrepiece of his vlog. The humor works to differentiate ‘us’, a supposedly coherent group of Europeans, from Islam, by which the latter is ‘othered’ as a violent threat that ‘wants’ to ‘take over the world’ and impose barbarism, varying from ‘subjugation of women’ to ‘persecution of Jews’. Therefore, and for the sake of freedom of speech, ‘we’ should have approved more strongly of Fitna, Condell maintains. Differentiation, then, is the main humor function employed by Condell, and the potential of such humor (and the non-distinctly humorous parts of the vlog as well) is to divide groups of people, in this case, along their religious differences.

### *I am a Muslim*

The video *I am a Muslim* begins with a young man walking up a stage with a brownish background. Only in the last sentence of the testimonial does the man reveal his identity: ‘My name is Muhammad, and I am a Muslim!’, he then says with a raised voice. Yet the title of the vlog hints from the start that the man’s identity is Islamic, thus imposing a reading of the text in which ‘a Muslim’ is performing.

What does Muhammad offer, and how is his vlog humorous? He begins with mentioning several things he, as a religious individual (‘I’), ‘is not’ (e.g., ‘terrorist’, ‘date merchant’) or ‘does not’ (e.g., ‘living in a tent’, ‘riding a camel’). The rejection of these things constitutes self-deprecation, but in an ironic way. The irony is achieved when viewers recognize the stereotypes and join Muhammad in his

derision of such prejudice. Particularly these viewers, therefore, may find mirth in Muhammad's ironic self-deprecation, which is the most pertinent humor genre performed in the vlog.

Figure 2: I am a Muslim

Throughout the vlog, Muhammad's narration style is characterized by fervour as achieved by verbal



subsequent verbal and visually supported appraisal of a peaceful Islam that can be reconciled with Americanness.

I don't think you're an infidel. I believe in peace. I believe in people of all different religions and believes living together in harmony, like the early Islamic Arab, Ottoman and Spanish empires. (...) Trust me, I would go back to my own country, but I'm already in it.' [American flag shown for a few seconds]

Coming from 'a Muslim', peacefulness (towards non-Muslims) and Americanness are rendered 'Islamic' here, things Muhammad claims to be as a Muslim, which exemplifies how the vlog's narrative is pacifistic rather than antagonistic towards non-Muslims and Americans. Also note that Muhammad refers to non-Muslims as 'you'. Non-Muslims, therefore, seem to form his primary target group, indicating that Muhammad aspires to convince whom he considers as fellow citizens in the US.

Muhammad closes his testimonial with less personal remarks about the scientific achievements and everyday courage of Muslims, and the Quran's 'greatness'.

Muslims were the people who created some of the world's most beautiful architecture, we invented algebra, calligraphy, astronomy, geometry, and the modern numerical system. And a real man fasts, and isn't afraid to pray wide open in the mall. And he doesn't get nervous about washing his feet in a public restroom sink. And yes, that is the Quran [image of a book shown], I'm reading it, and I don't care if I'm in an airport, because it's the greatest book ever.

These remarks exude great satisfaction with the Islamic self and community, and consequently do not share the properties of the former part of the vlog in which Muhammad depicts himself by humor through ironic self-deprecating. In that part, Muhammad, as a Muslim, employs such humor to reject stereotypical portrayals of Muslims. He also constructs peacefulness and Americanness as things he adopts. In both ways, Muhammad builds a case in which the prevalent message seems to be: 'I, Muslim, am like you.' The group – 'you', his target group – to whom Muhammad belongs in his narrative includes non-Muslims, whom he embraces as 'not infidels' and aims to convince of the idea that they share important norms and values with himself and Muslims. This way, Muhammad performs a humor genre that works with the vlog's narrative overall (except the deviating last part) to foster identification between and thus unification of his target group and Muslims, particularly himself.

**The comments**

Sentiment Analysis indicates that the comments on *The religion of fear* have a positive sum score of 1883 and a negative sum score of -2045. The comments on *I am a Muslim* have a positive sum score of 1899 and a negative sum score of -2240. On a 5-points-scale, ranging from 1 to 5 (for positive sentiments) and -1 to -5 (for negative sentiments), the comments individually were most often attributed scores 1 to 3 and -1 to -4. Figure 3 and table 1 provide a more specific overview of these scores, showing the percentages of the sampled comments for each score category, and indicating the resemblance of the sentimental nature of the comments pertaining to the two videos.

Figure 3: Percentages sentiment scores visualized

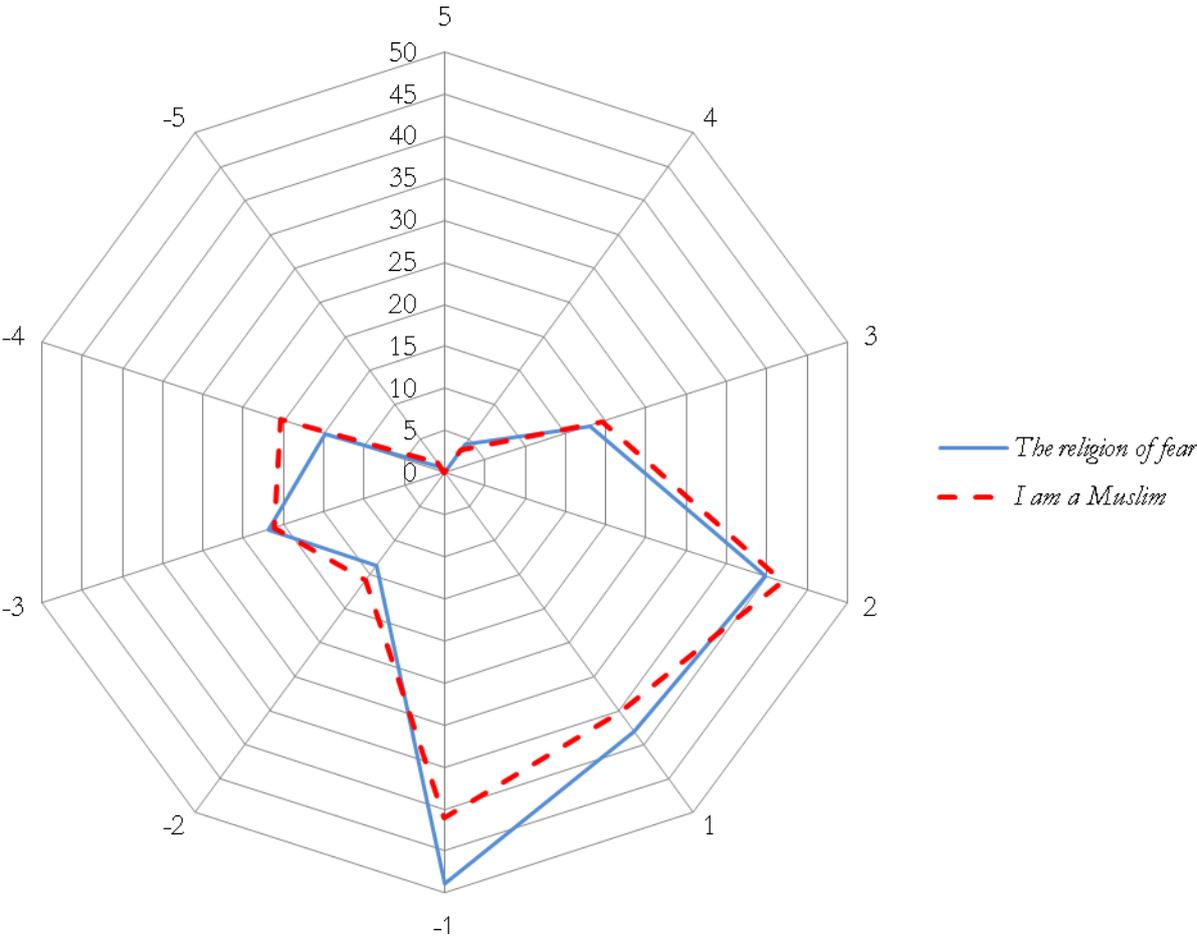


Table 1: Percentages sentiment scores specified

	5	4	3	2	1	-1	-2	-3	-4	-5
The religion of fear	.1	4.2	18	39.7	38	48.9	13.7	21.8	14.9	.7
I am a Muslim	0	3.3	19.5	42	35.2	41.1	15.9	21.2	20.3	1.5

Table and figure show the percentage of the sampled 2000 comments (1000 per video) for each score category.

Example: 4.2% of comments on *The religion of fear* was attributed score 4.

These results mean, in short, that negative and positive sentiments were about equally distributed among the sampled comments, although negative sentiments were overrepresented. A second conclusion is that *I am a Muslim* evoked comments that, overall, contained content with slightly more positive and negative sentiment than *The religion of fear*. Both conclusions are most directly indicated by the sum scores, with the negative sum scores for both vlogs being higher than their positive sum scores, and both sum scores for *I am a Muslim* being higher than those for *The religion of fear*.

Yet, the nature of the dominant sentiment in the comments on both videos (negative) does not say much yet about the particular ways in which these sentiments were expressed. We will investigate these ways in more detail on the basis of our qualitative analysis. While the contents and styles of the comments were richly varied, there were three tropes that stood out in this diversity: one was about the nature of Islam or Muslims ('Muslim world'; 'Islamic world'); a second was about 'the West' and Christianity, whether or not in their relation to Islam or Muslims; the third referred explicitly to the vlogs themselves.

### *Islam and Muslims*

Comments about Islam and Muslims were generally either fervidly critical or supportive about Islam or Muslims. More ambiguous comments were barely present. One way in which support and critique were constructed was through depictions of Islamic religious sources. Some comments included quotes or descriptions of the Quran or particular verses of the Quran. Other comments combined such quotes or descriptions with conclusions about the good or evil nature of Islam or Muslims, as il-

illustrated by the next posting. Richbee suggests that ‘most Muslims’ follow some verses that command freedom of religion and peacefulness, and therefore are ‘exceptionally gracious and peace-loving’.

*Richbee@I am a Muslim*

Most Muslims are exceptionally gracious and peace-loving people. And Islam has elements of peacefulness in it. For example, Muslims point to Sura 2:256 which claims there is no compulsion in religion (compulsion), or to Sura 29:46 which says not to dispute with People of the Book (Jews and Christians) unless they do wrong. Also, Sura 41:34 which instructs that one should respond to evil with doing good deeds to the evil doer.<sup>5</sup>

Such scripturalistic explanations of Islam’s or Muslims’ alleged nature were widespread. Aside from references to the Quran employed to depict ‘how Muslims are’, Muslims were also frequently characterized through depictions of their prophet Muhammad. He was often mentioned as mankind’s friend (e.g., ‘the best’) in pro-Islam comments, or foe (e.g., ‘paedophile’) in anti-Islam comments. By subsequently suggesting that Muslims strictly follow the prophet’s example, some comments characterized Muslims in similar good or bad ways. *CeltopersaTribute*, for instance, calls Muhammad a ‘child-raping, murderer, who lied, deceived and robbed’, which s/he takes as an explanation of why Muslims ‘are what they are’.

*CeltopersaTribute@The religion of fear*

Muslims all over the world rejoice, and squeal with delight, when appalling atrocities are committed in their name, by fellow muslims. (...) muhammad was a child-raping murderer, who lied, deceived and robbed, and muslims aspire to be like this piece of shit ? No wonder they are what they are.

There were also comments that did not explicitly refer to Muslims’ religious sources, but instead built images of their present-day social or political practices and traditions. A remarkable amount of these comments concerned violence (or ‘terrorism’) presumably committed by Muslims, especially violence committed against women, who were depicted as helpless victims or slaves of salacious Islamic men, as illustrated by the next comment by JKZok.

*JKZok@I am a Muslim*

[Islamic] women are for mans desire and lust. Divorce is easy, but a man can have 4 wives and as many tempory wives as they like. Age is no limit, sexual acts no problem, any time day or night. What rights have the women? None. They sold there sex to their husband, grit you teeth and think of home, is the call. These guys do not even know their women, just they look good, like a cattle market.

*The West and Christianity*

There were also comments that concerned two abstractions that were constructed in opposition to Islam or Muslims: ‘the West’ and Christianity. Comments about ‘the West’ were about the nature of Western society, depicted in positive terms (e.g., ‘tolerant’) or negative terms (e.g., ‘infidel’), and/or policies of ‘the West’ vis-à-vis Islam or the Middle East. There were also a few self-critical comments, as illustrated below, that resembled one part of Condell’s vlog about the ‘weak response’ of ‘the West’ to ‘Islamic threats’.

*TheEnemyIsIgnorance@The religion of fear*

Do you realize that the West must be the laughing stock of the entire world? How did this happen? Was it just our gutless politicians? No. We are just as much to blame. We showed the enemy acceptance & tolerance, and they kicked us in the teeth for it.

Violence committed to or by ‘the West’ was a popular topic, as illustrated by the example above. Commenters who defended Muslims or Islam denied that Muslims commit violence or justified or explained their violence by pointing to violence committed particularly by the US or Israel.

In some cases, the latter group of comments (and comments on other issues as well) responded explicitly to other comments. For example, after Foamulator mentioned a ‘suicide bombing that killed 35 people’, committed by ‘Islamist separatists from Chechnya’, another commenter, Rightway41, challenged Foamulator to unfold his views on Israeli and American policies in Palestine, Afghanistan and Iraq. Rightway41 seems to considers these policies as the cause of suicide bombings by Muslims.

*Rightway41@I am a Muslim*

what do you think of israeli crimes in palestine for more than 60 years ; and U.S. crimes in afganistan for more than 12 years ; and U.S. crimes in iraq 8 years? Islam is innocent of these acts. (...) Suicide of Muslims comes from the opporssion and depression and injustice done to the person. To the person .@foamulator.

Overall, however, comments responding to other comments formed a minority in our sample. Further, while in the example above the commenter does take up the issue addressed by the comment he responds to, this was not the case in most other comments that responded to other comments. Most of such comments changed the subject, debouched into appalling name-calling, or instructed discussants to get their ‘facts straight’.

Christianity was sometimes diametrically opposed to Islam as a better or worse alternative. In these cases, the Bible was compared to the Quran, Jesus with Muhammad, churches with mosques, and/or Christians with Muslims, mostly in terms of which is more peaceful or violent. The commenter Benssalahtiger, for instance, expects that following the ‘teachings of Jesus’ fosters peace worldwide, as opposed to the global ‘bloodbath’ that the commenter foresees if ‘everyone practices the religion of Muhammad’.

*Benssalahtiger@I am a Muslim*

If the whole world practices the teaching of Jesus the world would be peaceful place. A true religion of peace. But if everyone practices the religion of Muhammad, the whole world would be a bloodbath.

### *The vlogs*

A small amount of comments referred explicitly to the vlogs themselves. As is the case for the issue-focussed comments discussed above, the overwhelming majority of these comments can be subdivided into supportive or critical comments. Here too, there were only a few more hybrid messages present in our sample.

To begin with the first group, supportive comments often included words of gratitude to the vlogs’ rethors, Pat Condell or Muhammad. In some cases, commenters motivated their support by re-

stating some of the vlogs' arguments. In other cases, they added new ideas that were not constructed explicitly by the vlogs. Suzukidas2, for instance, first thanks Pat Condell for being 'so right', and then continues with building an argument that (like Condell's vlog) is critical of Muslims and (unlike Condell's vlog) revolves around 'control' and 'ego'.

*Suzukidas2@The religion of fear*

Thank you Pat Condell, you are so right..! Muslims are control freaks. No wonder they have started so many wars and have kill the most amount of people today. The problem is that ego can convert anything to its own use, or how they look at the Bible, or Quran.

There were also comments that simply expressed support for either one of the vlogs, without motivating why. Point6One8, for instance, responded to *I am a Muslim* by stating: 'Lol. Thanks for this awesome video Muhammad :)'; and by exclaiming 'This guy is just awesome!', another commenter, Zedphoton, expressed admiration for Condell's performance.

Critical comments were frequently also very short, and lacked any substantive content. Most of these comments were *ad hominem* by nature, using fierce invectives to assault the character, appearance, or ethnic or religious background of Muhammad or Condell.

Longer critical comments referred to specific parts of the vlogs' contents and labelled these with terms that connote or denote their 'falsehood'. More frequently, however, critique was constructed with ideas, often posited as 'facts', that were not included explicitly in the vlogs themselves. Only some comments were critical, but ambiguously so and with caution. An example of such critique comes from Suzukida2, who starts his comment with expressing reservations about *I am a Muslim* ('I have my doubts'; 'I'm 50/50 on this video'). Aside from these doubts, the commenter suggests that the vlog unrightfully ignores 'atrocities' of which he 'knows' the 'Muslim world have committed' [sic], despite of what is wrong 'morally' and 'in Islam as well'. Islam as such, apparently taken as a source of commandments, is thus not constructed as an evil here that causes the 'atrocities'; the guilt rather lies with the 'Muslim world' that disobeys Islam.

*Suzukidas2@I am a Muslim*

Trust me, I have my doubts. I'm 50/50 on this video. And I know of the stoning, beheading, & other atrocities that Muslim world have committed. They are real and they are wrong not just morally but in ISLAM as well.

## **Discussion**

We have demonstrated how the narratives built by *The religion of fear* and *I am a Muslim* differ, particularly in regard to the humor functions they employ. Humor in the former video is used to differentiate between Islam or Muslims, and 'us' or non-Muslims, while humor in the latter vlog works to produce identification between those groups on shared norms and values. However, these and other textual differences between the vlogs, as discussed above, are not related to distinct differences between the comments on the two vlogs. The sampled comments on both vlogs were about evenly negative and positive qua sentimental tone, and these sentiments were generally articulated through either strongly critical or supportive commentary respectively on the vlogs themselves, Islam, the West or Christianity.

While these findings are by no means 'representative' for other communicative dynamics on the vlogosphere, whether or not about Fitna or Islam generally, our case study does produce food for thought for humor and deliberation theory. YouTube has been acknowledged as one of the most potent places where people can perform and contest identity, and rightfully so. However, performances and contestations of religious identity come in different forms, and the forms of discussion identified in the comments on the vlogs investigated here generally did not meet the high norms of meaningful and constructive interreligious dialogue and democratic deliberation (cf. Graham, 2009; Jaggar, 2000; Volf, 1996). For instance, reciprocity, acknowledging and responding to other debaters' views, was not characteristic for the comments in our sample. Therefore, reflexivity, reflecting another person's position against one's own, also came in short supply, and the same was even more true for a third criterion of what is considered to be proper debate, showing empathy. Leaving exceptions aside, all too often commenters advised other commenters to get their facts straight when they provided

commentary conflicting with their own, or offered them pungent name-calling or ridicule. More generally, the critical nature of many comments amounted to a degree of negative sentiment in the commentary that was comparable with the degree of positive sentiment. Supportive comments, furthermore, were rarely positive in an ‘inclusive’ way; instead of claiming similarity between Muslims and others, they often praised one group in relation to the other, and thereby discursively fortified rather than alleviated tensed religious divisions. Only some comments that referred explicitly to and supported the vlog *I am a Muslim* had inclusive features, but these comments formed a small minority in our sample.

While these results strike resemblance with the findings of some earlier studies of online discussions about Fitna (Van Zoonen et al., 2009, 2010, forthcoming) or other topics (e.g., Hagemann, 2008; Strandberg, 2002), implications of our study specifically concern the hope one finds in humor theory for evoking positive sentiment and ultimately constructive deliberation and dialogue. Comedic vlogs such as the ones we analyzed might stimulate reflection or relaxation among some of their viewers, potentially leading indirectly to a more deliberative way of *thinking*. The extent to which and how such cognitive or emotional processes may be evoked by comedic narration online will hopefully be investigated by future studies. Meanwhile, our study indicates that such narration does not necessarily translate *linea recta* into what is considered as a deliberative way of *discussing*. After all, we found no distinct differences between the vlogs’ comments, although there were in the humor and narratives overall of Condell and Muhammad, searching to divide and unite Muslims and non-Muslims respectively. The comedic nature of the vlogs, therefore, does not seem to have an immediate impact on commenters’ discursive attitudes and practices, as one might expect from humor theory (cf. Meyer, 2000; Miczo & Welter, 2006). Instead, it seems that the vlogs create a space on YouTube that users exploit to opine about Fitna and Islam generally in relative independence of the humorous nature (dividing or uniting) of the vlogs.

What seems to have more influence are the nature and context of the issues addressed by the two vlogs. Islam is an utterly controversial topic, especially since 9/11; and particularly when one

forms and shapes views on Islam or experiences of being a Muslim in prolonged socialization processes, it is perhaps too much to ask from unifying humor to open up new possibilities for constructive communication. The controversial nature of the topic at hand might also explain, at least partly, why our findings contrast sharply with some earlier studies that found constructive elements in forum discussions about less contested topics (e.g., Coleman, 2004; Graham, 2009). When specifically Islam or related topics are discussed, it seems, discursive spaces online become ‘communicative jungles’ (Schulz, 2000), with a lot of roaring and less attentive listening to, critical contemplation of, or empathizing with alternative viewpoints (Van Zoonen et al., forthcoming; Witschge, 2007). Not even comedy changes that, our case study suggests, at least not in a sudden, mechanic way whereby one turns from an exclusive to an inclusive discourse when exposed to uniting funniness online.

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## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> [Http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JQXh20OuhIc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JQXh20OuhIc) (30 March 2011).
- <sup>2</sup> [Http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W3\\_qelW5qp4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W3_qelW5qp4) (30 March 2011).
- <sup>3</sup> [Http://www.patcondell.net](http://www.patcondell.net) (30 March 2011).
- <sup>4</sup> Number of comments as on 30 March 2011, on the URLs mentioned in footnotes 1 (*I am a Muslim*) and 2 (*The religion of fear*).
- <sup>5</sup> All quotes are copied from YouTube in their original form. They are not corrected for errors in spelling or grammar.