A presumption guiding this analysis is that religious movements are constituted through communicative acts—practices of mediation whereby adherents bind themselves to one another and to a higher power. Religious movements are brought together—realized as movements—through the circulation of discursive forms that address religious subjects, calling them into being, uniting them in common actions of reading, listening, seeing. In the contemporary world, electronic media are central to this process. They are dominant technologies (though by no means the only ones) whereby this circulation takes place and the forms of political and religious identities are forged. How then do we understand the nature of mediation and circulation in forming religious movements? And what does this tell us about the nature of the category of religion itself?

My interest is in looking at the work of the South African Muslim cleric Ahmed Deedat. In the 1970s and 1980s, Deedat became an enormously popular figure across the Muslim world, known for using the Bible in order to attack the legitimacy of Christianity. Defining his specialty as “comparative religion,” Deedat borrowed from biblical hermeneutics and secular criticism to attack the idea that the Bible is a work of revelation. The polemical nature of his critique, coming during the emergence of Christian televangelists in the 1970s, promulgated him to enormous fame in the Muslim world. He came to be seen as the Muslim “response” to the massive rise of evangelical Christianity and a media presence to rival Christian preachers. To that end, Deedat’s mimicking of evangelism and secular debate was not confined to rhetorical styles: he also mimicked the infrastructure of missionary evangelism by circulating pamphlets and
audio- and videocassettes of public lecture tours and by appearing on
television in Muslim countries. By presenting lectures in public spaces
such as town halls and staging debates with famous Christian preachers, he
also mimicked the rationalist, secular modes of the public sphere. Deedat
recognized the distinction between literalist evangelists (“bible thumpers,”
as he called them) and secular modes of critique, but, like many Muslims,
Deedat saw both as variants within Christianity. When he referred to tak-
ing hold of the “toolbox” of Christians, Deedat saw the differences between
evangelism and secularism as less relevant than their common origins in a
non-Muslim Christian world where both appeared as opponents to Islamic
da’wa (revival). Deedat’s distinction lies in his transgression, his inhabiting
of Christian rhetorical modes. Speaking as a Muslim in a Christian style,
displaying greater biblical erudition than his Christian opponents, and
performatively presencing Christianity in both its religious and secular
guises, Deedat played with the formal boundaries between religious tra-
ditions in order to mock and ridicule his opponents. Deedat both copies
Christian and secular forms and comments on them, turning them into
object languages subject to his metapragmatic commentary.

The categories of religious and secular have come in for a great deal
of reexamination recently, as scholars have moved away from the idea of
religion as a seemingly self-evident system and examined the genealogies
where ideas of religions—Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, and
so on—emerged, largely in Western Europe in the nineteenth century. Gil Anidjar argues that the concept of religion emerged as part of colo-
nial epistemology, exported as one part of a much wider colonial project,
and Jonathan Z. Smith concurs in that religion, he argues, is not a native
category but something “imposed from the outside” as a second order rationalizing of non-Christian religious practices. Talal Asad, in moving
away from attempts to define the “essence” or “nature” of a religion as an
abstract system, argues instead that many adherents see religion as imma-
nent to quotidian practices and rituals performed on a daily basis with little
idea of larger conceptions of “Christianity” or “Islam” as coherent theolo-
gies. Saba Mahmood and Charles Hirschkind term this daily practice “the
ethical cultivation of the self.” Hirschkind and Mahmood are interested
in da’wa movements in Egypt—the process of renewal and revitalization
that has marked the rise of Salafi Islam—and their focus is on the micro-
practices Muslims undertake to learn how to produce and reproduce what
it means to be a Muslim. To be Muslim, they argue, is to cultivate ethical
and pious sensibilities—modes of comportment, dress, daily bodily habits;
virtues such as shyness, modesty, and obedience—the regular practice of
which will lead to a pious life. Their focus is on those elements of religious
practice internal to the religious tradition and that provide the “grammar
of the concepts” by which religious subjects are defined.
Hirschkind and Mahmood point toward the pragmatics of religion, the idea that religion is not an essence but something that is mobilized and emerging out of specific situations of practice, encoded in particular material forms. This is an idea I draw on, using it to examine not the internal constitution of religious movements but the instability of their borders. Deedat’s religious practice leads us away from dynamics within a religious tradition and pushes us to examine the ways in which religious traditions are in mutual tension, borrowing from each other at the same time that they are defining themselves against one another. This idea is presupposed by Asad in his concept of religious tradition as dynamic and processual, incorporating elements outside of itself. But Deedat dramatizes the difficulty in drawing the boundaries of religious practices that are often dialogically constituted through their engagement with other religious traditions. More spectacularly, he forcibly raises the place of polemic in the formation of religious revival and communal identity. Deedat makes us ask how we conceive of Muslim religious tradition and practices of da’wa when Pentecostal Christianity is part of the grammar of concepts that constitute Islamic practice. What happens when Islamic revival deploys the forms of the secular public sphere?

**Pentecostalism and Islamism**

Michael Warner has argued that the secular public sphere provides the media ecology for new religious movements. Drawing from Charles Taylor, Jürgen Habermas, and his own earlier work, Warner claims that the defining features of the public sphere—stranger sociability, secular time, the capacity to imagine a horizontally organized and potentially expansible world, reflexive choice between systems, voluntaristic association—are all elements whereby contemporary evangelical movements (both Christian and Muslim) begin to imagine themselves. As Taylor has argued—and Warner has extended his argument—a public is a set of potentially anonymous strangers bound together through the circulation of discursive forms. It is precisely because the public is organized not as a closed system but as infinitely expansive and decentered, occupying “empty homogenous time” rather than vertically oriented time, that the role of circulation is so important.

For Taylor it is through the circulation of pamphlets, letters, books, and cassettes that strangers are brought into common interaction, in which differing opinions can be exchanged, discussion elaborated, and society can come to a common mind about matters. Warner pushes this argument more strongly, claiming that a public is a self-organized collectivity that has no existence outside the activity of its own discursive circulation. To take briefly the example of Deedat’s critique of Christianity: Deedat
presents his arguments as part of debate, articulated to an unknown audience who could potentially be Muslim, Christian, Hindu, or secular. Its rhetorical address presumes a world that is not organized by one truth, one church, or one religious path, but assumes competing religious traditions from which, after arguments are presented, adherents will choose. That choice may be predetermined, but it draws legitimacy from the staging of the choice itself. Deedat, like the Christian evangelists he counters, couches his arguments in terms of voluntarism as if he were involved in a competition for believers whose choice to join one religion or another is a matter of personal preference. Following Warner, what makes Deedat a self-conscious adopter of a discourse of a rational public sphere is not his use of logic and rationality, “proving” the falsity of the Bible through historical textual analysis, but the way he structures his movement in forms of time, stranger sociability, and voluntaristic uptake taken from the secular public sphere.

The idea of a public is very congenial for thinking about how new religious movements are constituted and organized. It places attention on how religions are encoded in the discursive and circulatory forms through which they are constituted and their claims enabled. But there are several issues I am interested in that Taylor and Warner focus less on. For them a public can sometimes seem like a container, a clearly definable thing, holding within it a collective community. Taylor explicitly emphasizes that the public is made up of like-minded individuals who, while they debate and enter into conflict, largely share a horizon of understanding about the boundaries of debate and embody the cultural competence to understand the circulation of books, rituals, and discursive forms that makes debate mutually intelligible. For Taylor, there is a structuring understanding of the public sphere as containing differing points of view, but these are, in the ultimate instance, resolved into consensus and like-mindedness. Hence his idea of “forming a common mind” that is more than a summation of opinions and something forged anew out of this exchange.10 “[T]he public sphere is an association which is constituted by nothing outside of the common action we carry out in it: coming to a common mind, where possible, through the exchange of ideas.”11

Warner, by contrast, advances an idea of counterpublics, particularly queer and religious counterpublics, that are excluded from dominant norms and who mobilize to form their own alternative collectivities. This addresses a much more conflictual social space than Taylor is interested in, but here, too, there is an implicit assumption that different publics each have their own circulatory modes, their own discursive forms, so that one can neatly be separated from the other. A single person might inhabit multiple publics, but each of those publics is united (and thus separable) through its own specific genres, types of speech, and modes of address.
In my present work, I am interested in what happens when those forms are promiscuous—when one public takes the discursive forms used to constitute another public. The issue emerges with the very idea of a religious public as, in many respects, the idea of a public is forged against the idea of religion. So if a religion constitutes itself as a public, this inherently is—or was in its originary moment—a transgressive act. Precisely how, then, did Islamic movements come to use the genres, speech forms, and institutional arrangements of evangelical Christianity as part of the constitution of Islamic revival? It is a commonplace idea that one can be a member of different publics, but not so clear that one can be a member of incommensurate publics. Inhabiting a Muslim public, for instance, presumably precludes one from inhabiting a Christian one. But if a Christian public is constituted by performative and formal practices, and Muslim adepts then use those forms, what does this mean for the categories involved?

Ahmed Deedat

Ahmed Deedat moved to South Africa from India as a child in 1927. He left school early in order to work in business and was never formally trained as an Islamic scholar. Growing up in South Africa, Deedat has remarked, was to be adrift in an “ocean of Christianity” as Muslims represented a tiny minority that were ethnically marked and more closely connected to Islamic traditions in South Asia than to those elsewhere on the continent. Deedat’s motivation came from working in a country shop near a mission school and being subject to taunting by students critical of Islam. In the narrative of his life, Deedat gives prominence to his discovery of a nineteenth-century text, Izhar ul-Haq (The Truth Revealed) by Sheikh Rahmat Allah Kairanawi, which was a summation of Islamic biblical studies designed to repudiate the status of the Bible as a work of revelation. Drawing on this model, Deedat began to develop his own practice of da’wah, challenging missionaries to debates and speaking out against evangelical arguments. In 1957 he established the Islamic Propagation Center and, as David Westerlund and Goolam Vahed point out, for several decades Deedat’s original audience was limited to South Africa. Deedat’s arguments were worked out in the particular crucible of South Africa and directed against traditional evangelical groups such as the Jehovah’s Witnesses. But in the 1980s the rise of born-again evangelical Pentecostalism, now recast as a dynamic, technologically sophisticated missionary operation, and the spread of Salafi-inspired reformism within the Muslim world gave Deedat an international presence. He received funds from Gulf states to distribute his pamphlets free of charge, or for
small sums, began to make international lecture tours, and, perhaps most famously, challenged major Christian pastors to public debates—often held within Christian heartlands such as the United Kingdom or United States. These debates, in turn, were taped and circulated on videocassettes (and then video CDs, and now YouTube). In 1986 he was awarded the lucrative and prestigious King Faisal Award for his service to Islam and da’wa.\textsuperscript{15}

**Form**

Deedat’s da’wa is of a particular kind. He has little to say about the errancy of Sufism or Shi’ism, for instance, and makes no particular demand for establishing an Islamic state (though he was supportive of these efforts in Nigeria).\textsuperscript{16} Rather his entire effort is directed at undermining and refuting Christian evangelism and arming Muslims against Christian attacks. His fame is thus based not on the mastery of Islamic sciences but on his thoroughgoing knowledge of the Bible. As one Nigerian characterized him, Deedat “opened the eyes of millions of Muslims in the fine art of inter-religious dialogue.” His knowledge of English, his skill at debating, and his mastery of other scriptures “endured him to the millions who have seen his videos or read his tracts, millions of which are sent free of charge all over the world.”\textsuperscript{17} Examples of these tracts and videos appear in figures 1 and 2.

Deedat’s source of authority, then, is an unusual one, drawing on the mastery of Christian rather than Muslim texts and his skill at English rather than Arabic. And he was innovative in distributing millions of copies of his writings in a series of pamphlets reproduced cheaply, free from copyright, with a provocation to translate them into different languages: “We grant you an open licence to reproduce or translate into any language this booklet as well as every other publication of ours. You may publish them for sale or for free distribution without any prior permission. We ask for no royalties or ‘copyrights.’ Wallah! If we had the means we would have flooded the world with our free literature. It will be appreciated if a few copies of the reproduction be posted to us for our records.”\textsuperscript{18}

The videotape of Deedat’s lecture *Crucifixion* or *Crucifiction*? opens with an establishing shot of a stage with a table, lectern, and microphone and a title announcing “Capetown Town Hall.”\textsuperscript{19} The shot is taken from above, looking down on Deedat, who is seated at a table, and alongside him is a lectern at which stands the host, one Imam Anwar, introducing him. This version of *Crucifixion* takes the form of a lecture, unlike other versions he has circulating that take the form of public debates with Christian opponents on the same subject. Before discussing the content of Deedat’s teachings, I wish to consider first its form: to think about the mode of address Deedat is using and the sort of collectivity he is calling into being.
On the one hand, Deedat is calling into being an umma, or community of believers, through his address to an audience, and also through the circulation of the video itself. But it is an umma that is addressed as if it were a secular public. The style and presentation of the lecture is secular and the iconography Western. It takes place in a town hall, after all, the ur-space of a secular, rational public. Deedat wears a suit with an open-neck shirt (though his beard and cap make him recognizably Muslim). He speaks in English, not in Arabic or Urdu, the more familiar languages of Islamic religious learning, and the talk takes the form of a lecture. It is a presentation very much like any talk one could hear at a university. Deedat is referred to as “Sheikh,” though his authority is based on his mastery of Christian texts rather than deep learning within an authoritative Islamic tradition.

Before Deedat speaks, he is introduced by Imam Anwar who announces that the lectures are well advertised in advance and that, at the end, all are welcome to ask questions. As “the topics that are being dealt with are sensitive topics,” the chair stresses the need to respect questions coming from people of opposing faiths. “If a man has grown up believing the Bible is the word of God and holds it dear, respect him. Please do not...
heckle him.” “Anybody who wishes to ask a question” may do so, he continues. He acknowledges that people will have differing views and that “we leave the judgment to you after Mr. Deedat has delivered his lecture.”

The fear of heckling indicates that the unseen audience is largely Muslim, but the declaration of tolerance, the need to respect all views, the announcing that anyone can speak all publicly perform the openness and free discussion that mark the ideal of the secular public sphere. Implicitly, the suggestion is that all speakers are inherently equivalent and that reason and truth will emerge from what Habermas referred to as the public clash of argument;20 “reason” here being, of course, the fact that Christ could not have been crucified, that Christianity is based on error. Given that the audience in the hall is largely Muslim and that the circulation of the video will primarily be to Muslims, it is interesting that the form of the presentation does not conform to the traditions of debate and the style of religious argument familiar within Islam. More orthodox Islamic preachers, as Asad has argued, would legitimize their arguments by reference to an authoritative discursive tradition, and in the case of da’wa movements, the classic texts would be the Qur’an and the Hadith.21 Deedat does this to some extent, in that he makes reference to the Qur’an as a work of revelation, but the substance of his critique is a rationalist one, using Christian texts themselves to prove their own errancy. Deedat is not dressed in a marked religious style and does not speak from a religious institution or in a language that commands religious prominence, and his argument does not draw on a lineage within Islamic thought to legitimize his positions and grant them authority. This is why I argue that the lecture, but more important the circulation of the lecture through the form of videocassette, addresses a Muslim umma as if it were a public. This is a public called into being through the circulation of the tape (and similar media), bringing into being new sorts of collectivity.
Deedat’s performances follow a particular style. They are nearly always live events recorded at institutions like town halls, universities, or, on occasion, London’s Royal Albert Hall, and remediated through videocassette and video CD, and the Internet. Deedat does not address the camera or the audience watching on television. Rather, he mediates an encounter. He is recorded giving lectures to a group, or debating another person in front of a live audience, and this live event is remediated through the editing and circulation of videocassettes and video CDs. These visual media effect a split between the address of the live event and the address of its mediation. Frequent subtitles scroll across the video commenting on the live event and framing it, addressing the televisual audience as Muslim in a way the live event never does. A cutaway to a white audience member in the video of *Crucifixion* includes the scrolling subtitle: “Watch this missionary bible thumper thumbing through his bible.” In a debate with the evangelist Robert Douglas, for instance, the video CD begins with titles stating that “Dr. Robert A. Douglas is head of the Zwimmer Center for the Study of Muslims.” Frequent subtitles scroll across the video commenting on the live event and framing it, addressing the televisual audience as Muslim in a way the live event never does. A cutaway to a white audience member in the video of *Crucifixion* includes the scrolling subtitle: “Watch this missionary bible thumper thumbing through his bible.” In a debate with the evangelist Robert Douglas, for instance, the video CD begins with titles stating that “Dr. Robert A. Douglas is head of the Zwimmer Center for the Study of Muslims.”22 “The Study of Muslims” is in capital letters, colored differently from the rest of the type, and blinking on and off, providing a metadiscursive frame that explicitly addresses the audience as Muslim. By addressing the live audience as secular and the mediated one as Muslim, the videos reconstitute the supposed neutrality and objectivity of the rational Enlightenment form of the public lecture. For Deedat, and many Muslims, who see these secular performative and rhetorical forms as an alternate version of Christianity rather than opposed to and separate from it, this framing is a way of reflexively commenting on Christianity itself.

*Is the Bible God’s Word?*

Deedat’s key mode of argument, manifest in his most famous works, *Is the Bible God’s Word?* and *Crucifixion or Crucifiction?* is to critique Christianity through close biblical hermeneutics. Deedat is particularly brilliant at using revised and retranslated versions of the Bible to point out the textual differences and in quoting sections of the Bible that describe the same event using different facts. His aim is to undermine its status as the literal word of God as, for Deedat, the Bible is the work of many different hands, all of them human, and the internal construction of the Bible makes this palpably clear. Through his reading of Rahmat Allah Kairanawi, Deedat draws on nineteenth-century German philological criticism that examined inconsistencies in the Bible to argue that the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Old Testament or Torah) consisted of different accounts of the same event rather than a revelation from God. Deedat’s critique confines him to this critical mode. Crucially, he does not base his critique of Christianity on the authority of the Qur’an as a
later revelation from God but rather he stays strictly within the confines of rationalist textual criticism. He makes frequent mention of the Qur'an, of course, but then argues that because this text only has legitimacy for Muslims, his address to non-Muslims demands that the source of his critique lie outside of Islamic theology.

Is the Bible God's Word? begins with Deedat establishing the errancy of the Bible according to Christians themselves. He cites from the preface to the Revised Standard Version (RSV) of the Bible that acknowledges the beauty and importance of the King James Bible, but also points out that this is not the opinion of a Muslim, his address to non-Muslims demands that the source of his critique lie outside of Islamic theology.

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who might be accused of bias, but that of Christians themselves. His style of presentation in print, interestingly enough, preserves a sense of the live voice of Deedat, who is a powerful orator, and after seeing the video one cannot read the boldface and capitals without hearing the stress of his voice. Deedat goes on to duplicate a copy of the Jehovah’s Witness magazine *Awake!* that announces on its cover, “50,000 Errors in the Bible?” again suggesting that the source of biblical critique lies within Christianity itself and therefore must be true. Similarly, he makes great play of the fact that the Catholic Bible contains seventy-three books while the Bible used by their Protestant coreligionists has only sixty-six. “The Protestants have bravely **expunged seven whole books** from their Book of God!” Deedat tells us, referring to their gamble with the anger of God.

Once the general inconsistency of the Bible is established, Deedat moves into a more detailed exegesis. Where the Book of Samuel tells us that God moved David to take a census of the Jews, Deedat points out that the Book of Chronicles states it was the devil who made him do it. Where Samuel says that, in the war against the Syrians, David slew seven hundred chariots and forty thousand footmen, Chronicles states the numbers at **seven thousand** chariots and forty thousand footmen. Chronicles announces that the boy Jehoiacin was eight years old when he began to rule as king of Jerusalem, Kings that he was eighteen. If this is the word of the Lord, Deedat argues in his sarcastic style, why would God allow so many errors: “Can we say (God forbid!) that the all-knowing Almighty could not count, and thus did not know the difference between 8 and 18?” Similarly, Deedat pastes passages from Kings 19 and Isaiah 37 side by side, showing that they are word-for-word the same text. He wonders whether God was plagiarizing himself or whether “God Almighty had not absent mindedly dictated the same tale twice.”

All of these citations are supported with facsimile reproductions from the Bible itself (see fig. 4).

More serious is Deedat’s exegesis of those differences between different versions of the Bible which touch upon doctrinal issues that go to the heart of Christian practice. The RSV, for instance, replaces the word *virgin* with *maiden*. The first epistle of John is the most substantive evidence in the Bible for the idea of the trinity—a key doctrinal difference between Christianity and Islam—yet this evidence, present in the King James Bible, is completely erased from the RSV. Similarly, Deedat argues there are only two places in the Gospel (Mark and Luke) that describe Jesus’ ascension into heaven (a key textual support for the divine nature of Jesus) and one of them, Mark 16:9–20, is completely erased from the RSV of 1952 as unsubstantiated in the most ancient biblical manuscripts (see fig. 5).

“The **hot-gospellers** and the **Bible-thumpers** were too slow in catching the joke,” Deedat acerbically points out. The ascension “had been
undermined as a result of Christian Biblical erudition.”

For Deedat, these particular inconsistencies do not just expose the error of Christianity, they bring “the Holy Book yet another step closer to the teachings of Islam.”

Given the inconsistency in facts, the revision of key aspects of theology in later variants of the Bible, and the duplication of sections and the excision of others, Deedat is scathing about the possibility of divine inspiration for texts where so many key elements are under question. “Bible-thumpers will insist that ‘every word, comma, and full stop of the Bible is God’s word!’” Deedat tells us. “Do words have any meaning in their language?” he asks.

It is only once he has established the errancy of the Bible from within its own discursive tradition that Deedat invokes the Qur’an. In Is the Bible God’s Word? the Qur’an is used to provide divine substantiation to what Deedat has already proved by biblical hermeneutics and human reason.
Deedat’s arguments are metareflexive commentaries that mimic Christian and secular rhetorical forms by reducing them to the status of object languages. This is a complex process as the preachers Deedat mimics are themselves skilled in metareflexive activity, quoting apt sections of the Bible or the life of Jesus in order to make them relevant to an endless variety of contemporary and future events. Deedat uses close textual exegesis, a familiar part of the biblical literalism of evangelist rhetorics, but subordinates both biblical text and the form of hermeneutics to a larger argument. He is, at the same time, mimicking a style and implicitly commenting on the act of metareflexivity itself. The two main registers Deedat deals with are evangelical literalism, associated strongly with transnational televangelists and the rise of Pentecostalism, and rationalist, historical biblical criticism, associated with many mainline Christians and

Figure 5. The excision of the resurrection. From Ahmed Deedat, Is the Bible God’s Word? (Lagos: Ibrash Islamic Publications, n.d.)
secular historians. From Deedat’s Muslim point of view, all of these different positions, even secularism, are essentially Western and Christian. Even when drawing on the historicist critiques of the Bible to make his point, Deedat is highly aware that he is occupying the linguistic space of a Christian preacher. In the video for *Crucifixion or Crucifiction?* for instance, he disavows the potentially offensive nature of his title by saying “these are borrowed words” taken from “the Christians’ own toolbox,” and his work makes frequent reference to taking hold of the techniques and practices of Christians themselves.

Deedat places attention not just on the metareflexive but also the metapragmatic nature of the events he is engaged in. His style is powerfully, if not spectacularly, dialogic, in that he is so deeply oriented to speech events and rhetorical forms that lie “elsewhere,” outside of Islam and in a Christian world. Deedat depends upon the actual arguments and referential statements of revisionist biblical scholarship that highlight the faulty translation of early works and that insist on greater historical truth in revising the biblical text. But he moves beyond reference in his metapragmatic activity. When Deedat quotes extensively from the Bible and then reproduces a facsimile of the text from which he has just quoted, there is a redundancy that indicates the metareflexive nature of the event (see fig. 3). The facsimile is not there for reference—it cannot be a signifier pointing to meaning lying elsewhere, as we have already been given that meaning. Rather the facsimile is a mode of presencing, of making the Bible literally present in Deedat’s text in exact, typographic uniqueness so that it can be subject to his metacommentary. Deedat is turning attention toward the materiality of the performative act itself, and this is true whether we are talking about a facsimile of a Bible, a debate in front of a podium and lecture hall, or its remediation on video or video CD. These are metareflexive performative practices that highlight the forms and infrastructures of proselytizing. Deedat explicitly inhabits the circulatory infrastructure of Christian evangelism. He stages his act of borrowing as an interpretive, tactical, and performative act.

Deedat’s *da’wa* feeds on the massive boom in Christian media brought about by the Pentecostal revival, which created a model to be aped and a force to be resisted. It also indicates how thoroughly Deedat’s religious practice is constituted by its engagement with Christian forms by both copying them and overtly resisting them and foregrounds the polemical, dialogic nature of the encounter. Deedat’s public debates present this polemical encounter in spectacular fashion, and the force of his argument resides precisely in the performative excess of inhabiting a Christian register while at the same time mocking it. It generates a thrill of transgression. It is why audiences find him funny, and why they relish his mastery. Deedat’s importance depends upon his inhabiting the physical
and discursive spaces of Christianity — its modes of biblical exegesis, forms of public debate, its buildings, pamphlets, video- and audiocassettes — as he is asserting a Muslim presence in the world of Islam’s opponents. In societies such as Nigeria, where the perceived global conflict between Christianity and Islam is a powerful public issue, the charge of this sort of transgression is high.

All these forces came to the fore in the public debates Deedat staged with a series of Christian missionaries,31 the most famous of which was with the American evangelist Jimmy Swaggart and took place in the 1980s at the peak of Swaggart’s international appeal. The video of this event opens with an image of the headquarters of the Islamic Propagation Center International before cutting to a U.S. flag fluttering under a superimposed title: “Deedat’s American Tour.”32 To the accompaniment of trumpets the flag is replaced by successive images of the Statue of Liberty, the Golden Gate Bridge, a mansion in Baton Rouge, and the University of Louisiana. Starting with America at its most symbolic level, the sequence telescopes us from the general context to the particular one of Jimmy Swaggart’s home base, Baton Rouge, where the debate takes place. As with his debates in the Royal Albert Hall and in other parts of the United States, Canada, and elsewhere, Deedat physically enters into the terrain of the opposition. When he argues to Swaggart that recent versions of the Bible “prove” the errancy of the King James Version, he states: “I didn’t print it. The Jews didn’t print it. The Hindus didn’t print it. You, Christians. You produced this book and you are telling me it is the most up-to-date Bible according to the most ancient manuscripts.” He continues to cite the critique emanating from the Revised Standard Version, pointing out to Swaggart and the audience that “these are not my words,” that this is not a critique from within the Islamic tradition but one that comes from the discursive and rhetorical world of Christianity itself. It is precisely through his travels to Christian countries, his debates, and his remediation of the debates on videocassette and video CD that Deedat physically and symbolically enters the terrain of the enemy (from a Muslim perspective).33 He challenges Christian preachers on their own turf both literally, by traveling to places like Baton Rouge, and rhetorically, through a public contest over biblical mastery. Deedat builds a form of da’wa that necessarily depends on mimicry and transgression and a constant engagement with a different religious tradition.

Contact and the Polemical Performance

At the heart of Deedat’s polemic is the encounter between Christians and Muslims and the Muslim response to evangelism. His lectures are designed to arm Muslims against “these slinking missionaries who
‘attack’ the home and hearth of the unsuspecting Muslim.” He wishes
for his work to “find a place in the Muslim home as a bulwark against the
missionary menace.” Much of his work is staged around an encounter
with missionaries and his writings specifically addressed to countering
an opposing missionary figure. This is clear in his public debates with
evangelists, but even in his written work he often raises an imaginary fig-
ure of a “bible-thumper” against which his arguments are then directed.
Is the Bible God’s Word? for instance, opens with the anecdote: “While
I was still formulating the theme of this booklet, I heard a knock at the
door one Sunday morning. I opened the door. A European gentleman
stood there, grinning broadly. ‘Good morning’ he said, ‘Good morning’
I replied. He was offering me his ‘Awake’ and ‘Watchtower’ magazines.
Yes, a Jehovah’s Witness! If a few had knocked at your door previously,
you will recognize them immediately. The most supercilious lot of people
who ever knocked at people’s doors! I invited him in.” And, at the end
of the pamphlet, he explicitly admonishes Muslims not to reject the Bible
because it is Christian but to use it as a “weapon to meet the Christian
challenge” from the “‘ONE BOOK’ . . . professors who are knocking at
our doors with ‘the Bible says this’ and ‘the Bible says that.’ They
want us to exchange our Holy Qur’an for their ‘Holy Bible.’ Show them
the holes in the ‘holiness’ which they have not yet seen.” In a later
work, Combat Kit against Bible Thumpers, Deedat summarizes many of
his key criticisms laid out in alphabetical order as a series of key points
designed to arm Muslims for the conflict they are in. Deedat’s practice
is supremely other-directed, constantly in dialogic interaction and opposi-
tion to an imagined and real interlocutor who stands as proxy for an entire
religious resurgence. This is spectacularly enacted in his public debates
with Christian missionaries and his challenge to the pope to debate him
when next in Africa.

Deedat cannot fully be appreciated without recognizing the world-
wide resurgence of Pentecostal Christianity and the emergence of major
transnational Charismatic televangelists that took place in the 1970s and
1980s. Deedat’s form, ironically, was developed in opposition to an older
style of evangelism, particularly Jehovah’s Witnesses in the local context
of South Africa. But his international prominence and funding came after
the success and emergence of transnational Pentecostal movements across
Africa and many parts of the Muslim world. In one interview Deedat was
asked whether he has “a solution to the onslaught of media propaganda
directed at Islam and Muslims by the whole world,” indicating how his work
is viewed through the lens of the sustained encounter and conflict between
Islam and Christianity. Christian pamphlets that respond to Deedat’s
teachings circulate widely in Nigeria (see figs. 6 and 7), and the claims
and counterclaims between the different sides have migrated to Web pages
and now YouTube. Deedat’s career was addressed to repudiating Christian evangelism, which explains his use of savage humor, invective, and the tactical nature of his practice. His work addresses the important role polemic and confrontation plays in the definition of religious community and not just through the mechanism of othering and separation through which the group is defined. But it also raises the complicated question of the porosity of religious communities and the tactile and formal ways they learn and borrow from each other even through mutual contest.

**Conclusion**

Deedat is both immensely popular and hugely controversial especially in countries with substantial Muslim and Christian populations who are often in a state of uneasy truce. In Nigeria, the context through which I know Deedat, state broadcasts of his teachings are regarded as inflammatory by Christians and by many Muslims (who recognize the fraught religious tensions in the nation). Even his supporters acknowledge the needlessly offensive nature of some of his teachings. His descriptions of the Bible as a book filled with alcohol abuse and incest or his emphasis on Christ as the descendant of an incestuous relationship are all provocations designed to outrage the Christian reader. “You can well guess,”

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Deedat writes in *Combat Kit against Bible Thumpers*, “where ‘Penthouse’ and ‘Playboy’ got their inspiration from. Wherefrom if not from the Book of Books?”

Deedat’s religious practice presupposes the public sphere as the grounds for his operation. It conceives of a world that is egalitarian, where superiority of opinion emerges from the mobilizing of reason and presents a mode of collectivity potentially open to everyone. Based on secular homogenous time, it is a world that presumes equal access and equal potential truth of all movements—secular, evangelical Christian, Muslim—not one marked by hierarchies of birth, religious charisma, or revelation. These features are the necessary preconditions for the critique he poses. But for Deedat it is a staging of the public sphere that is central for, even as he abides by its rules, he mocks and ridicules it, subjecting it to metacommentary even as it is enacted.

The same is true for the Christian language and Christian proselytizing practices that are the objects and subjects of Deedat’s lectures and debates. In talking about these practices, Deedat is also reenacting their form. Deedat uses the reflexive capacity of language and performative events to comment on and undermine Christian rhetorical forms and
Christian claims to divine revelation and religious superiority. And by
doing so he is reinforcing and reenergizing Muslim religious identity. But
reflexivity also brings with it complicity in that to comment upon Chris-
tianity he also must inhabit it and his polemic necessitates entanglement.
Metareflexivity is about connection, about the linking of two discrete
speech events or registers into one unit, establishing continuities and
connections between them⁴¹ and pointing toward the fundamental other
orientation to the constitution of speech and of community.

Deedat’s da’wa raises issues of reference and presence, the boundar-
ies of religious practice and their transgression, and how religious identity
is formed through the hostile and tactile engagement with competing
religious practices. Religious reformism is part of a tradition internal to
Islam. Certainly the emergence of da’wa movements in the last few decades
has drawn heavily on modes of training within the Islamic tradition, as
Hirschkind and Mahmood have argued. But in many parts of the Islamic
world, that disciplinary constitution of subject takes place in a mixed reli-
gious environment where modes of representing and constituting Islam
necessarily partake of other traditions. Deedat’s media practice reveals
the traveling of Christian rhetorical practices to Islamic da’wa and the
movement of a Muslim cleric to Christian spaces. His style of argument
is effectively a metareflexive critique that turns Christianity into an object
language—both through his oral and written arguments and through the
forms through which those arguments are circulated.

Notes

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1. See, for example, Ahmed Deedat, Is the Bible God’s Word? (Lagos: Ibrash
Islamic Publications, n.d.); Ahmed Deedat, Crucifixion or Crucifiction? (Lagos: Al-
Balagh, n.d.); Ahmed Deedat, Christ (Peace Be upon Him) in Islam (Ijebu-Ode,
Nigeria: Shebiotimo Islamic Publications, n.d.). For an analysis of Deedat’s theology,
see David Westerlund, “Ahmed Deedat’s Theology of Religion: Apologetics through
of Deedat’s life and influence in South Africa, see Goolam Vahed, “Sheikh Ahmed
Deedat: Muslim Polemicist par excellence” (unpublished manuscript).
2. Or so his supporters claim.
3. See, for example, Talal Asad, Genealogies of Religion: Disciplines and Reasons
of Power in Christianity and Islam (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993)
and Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity (Stanford, CA: Stanford
University Press, 2003); Tomoko Masuzawa, The Invention of World Religions; or,
How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Name of Pluralism (Chicago: Uni-
versity of Chicago Press, 2005); Jonathan Z. Smith, Relating Religion: Essays in the


7. Where Asad’s Genealogies of Religion was more involved with defining the internal self-regulation of religious traditions, his later work, Formations of the Secular (2003), pays more attention to the blurred borders between different traditions—in particular, the overlap and divergences between secularism and Christianity.


10. Taylor, A Secular Age, 186.

11. Ibid., 191.


13. Ramat Allah Kairanawi is a fascinating historical figure whose work had a huge influence on Deedat. His book Izhar al-Haq (The Light of Truth) was written in the nineteenth century at a period of intense evangelical activity in India as a repudiation of the work of the Basel missionary Carl Pfander. Pfander rejected earlier missionary efforts aimed at the conversion of royal elites and instead innovated publishing pamphlets that copied contemporary Islamic publications in the use of Urdu (as opposed to Farsi) and even in their font and lithographic style. This was an effort to proselytize to ordinary Muslims rather than elites, and the result generated a defensive response from Hindu and Muslim intellectuals. Rahmat Allah’s distinction was to critique Pfander and Christianity, not by quoting from the revelation of the Koran but by drawing on emerging revisionist biblical scholarship, secular histories, and different translations of the Bible. He drew up pamphlets rebutting Pfander’s claims and challenged him to a series of public debates, the first of which took place in Agra in 1854. Deedat’s debt to Rahmat Allah and to the crucible of religious confrontation between Muslims, Christians, and Hindus in nineteenth-century India is obvious, and it is fascinating in showing the diversity of historical streams flowing into his da’wa movement. See Avril Powell, “Muslim-Christian Conflagration: Dr. Wazir Khan in Nineteenth-Century Agra,” in Religious Controversy in British India: Dialogues in South Asian History, ed. Kenneth W. Jones (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 77–92; and Powell, Muslims and Missionaries in Pre-Mutiny India (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 1993). The full text for Izhar ul-Haq (The Truth Revealed) can be found in English at the Web site Islam for All, www.islam4all.com/newpage81.htm.


15. The King Faisal Award was initiated in 1979 and can be seen as part of a wider Saudi effort to cement its leadership role in the Islamic world in the wake of the Iranian revolution. It awards prizes of approximately $200,000 for Arabic literature,
Islamic studies, and service to Islam. Awards for science and medicine that often go to non-Muslims were introduced in 1982 and 1983.


17. Ibid.


20. Habermas, *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere.*


24. Ibid., 39.

25. Ibid., 33.

26. John 5:7: “For there are three that bear record in heaven, the FATHER, the WORD and the HOLY GHOST and these three are one.”


28. Ibid., 17.

29. Ibid.


31. To mention just a few, Deedat debated the American evangelists Josh McDowell, Robert Douglas, Floyd E. Clark, and Jimmy Swaggart; the Swedish pastor Stanley Sjoberg; and the Palestinian Christian Anis Shorros, among others.


33. Deedat’s pre-tour publicity for a debate at London’s Royal Albert Hall with the theology professor Floyd E. Clark described the tour as “an invasion in reverse. The British ruled over India, Egypt, Malaysia, etc., for a hundred years. Now for the conquest of Britain for Islam.” See Vahed, “Sheikh Ahmed Deedat.”

34. Deedat, *Is the Bible God’s Word?* 64.

35. Ibid., 12.

36. Ibid., 50.


40. Ahmed Deedat, “Combat Kit against Bible Thumpers” (under the entry for “Incest”), www.jamaat.net/combatkit/combat.html#Aids.
