Self-presentation and discursive construction of identities by American Muslim televangelists

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Televangelism or preaching religion via television/YouTube is one manifestation of the global culture of ‘infotainment’ where the domains of information and entertainment are blurred (e.g. van Zoonen 2005).

In this paper, I deconstruct strategies of self-presentation and construction of identities by three popular American Muslim televangelists that belong to three different generations, namely Yusuf Estes (born 1944), Hamza Yusuf (born 1958) and Ali Ardekani (born 1975).

Using a selected sample of their websites and YouTube videos, an eclectic approach of multi-modality (e.g. Kress and van Leeuwen 2001) and the Discourse Historical Approach (e.g. Wodak 2001) will be used to deconstruct images, dress codes, colour schemes; and the discursive strategies used by televangelists to present themselves as ‘media celebrities’, while constructing identities for their audiences.

Through exploring the above aspects, I will argue that one reason of the ‘celebrity’ status of these televangelists is that each has constructed a distinct ‘style’. Moreover, in many different ways, these televangelists have addressed the complexities of the socio-historical context of Muslims in the post 9-11 era.

Diverging from studies that have perceived ‘info-tainment’ as intrinsically ‘negative’ (e.g. see van Zoonen 2005:79 on politicotainment), I argue that televangelism has to be seen as a by-product of the broader interaction between commodification (of religion) and the rise of popular culture; and has to be evaluated in its own terms. I turn attention to media communication in the religious sphere, a domain little examined from a critical perspective.


Keywords: Multimodality, Muslims in the West, Discursive construction of identity.