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ABSTRACT ONLY – WORK IN PROGRESS

“The Changing Nature of Mediated Authority:
Youtube and Conversion Performances”

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While authority is generally associated with impositions of power, in order to become effective religious authority needs to be legitimated by those who accept its influence. Power doesn't disappear it is rather mitigated by the agency of adherents. Thus, religious authority can be explored as a spectrum, a differentiated negotiation that involves those in authority and those who ultimately bestow that authority through recognition. In the case of the authority of the preacher, adherents have an increased capacity in negotiation because preachers need audiences. Muslim scholar (*'ulamā'*) preachers transmit religious knowledge to the public for the sake of edification and exhortation, thus their effectiveness is a central goal of their discursive vocation. In the modern context print media, the spread of new religious movements, and the breakdown of *'ulamā'* institutions have meant that the spectrum of authority has changed due to the presence of compelling authoritative alternatives. With electronic media those fissures have increased, placing viewer preference at the forefront of effective discourse. It is a shift from credentialed, institutional personages to how an orator is perceived, and thus to the contexts of adherents. But this shift can also be attributed to the relational nature of the authority of one who delivers religious knowledge. In this paper, I will look at popular Muslim American Youtube orators like the once Christian Yusuf Estes. I will claim that Estes' authority and international acclaim is largely derived from the display of his talent in converting Christians to Islam. These widely received conversion performances are meant to reinforce faith through the dramatic and emotional demonstration of the superiority of Islam, instead of through instruction and exhortation. I will use conversion performances to argue that effective religious discourse has pushed the authoritative, even in regards to normative discourse, further into the realm of adherent agency and context.