

‘What about the wolves?’: The use of scripture in YouTube arguments

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Abstract

Reading and interpreting the Bible is an important practice in Evangelical Christian communities, both online and offline. Members of these communities employ biblical exegesis not only in convincing others about the validity of their beliefs, but also influencing the development of the social context in which they interact. Thus, reading and interpretation of the Bible serves both a theological purpose, allowing users to provide textual evidence for beliefs, and a practical social purpose, allowing users to map their own and others' actions onto biblical texts, either to condone or to condemn them. For users who hold the same belief about the importance of the Bible in making moral judgements, the biblical text can be a particularly useful tool to position oneself and one's actions. In this article, I employ concepts from positioning theory, to analyse how Evangelical Christian YouTube users read across the books of the Bible by treating similar uses of metaphorical language as interchangeable, and using them to position particular users and to make moral judgements about their actions. The analysis shows that reading and exegesis of scripture can be used in dynamic online environments to map characters and storylines from diverse biblical passages onto a particular online argument, providing a common resource for users from different backgrounds and contexts. Findings show that reading and interpretation of scriptures provide a powerful means of claiming authority for Evangelical Christians in the community, and are used to position oneself and one's actions, influencing the subsequent discourse and emerging social context.

Keywords

YouTube, Christian, positioning, social media, Internet, Bible

1 Background

1.1 Christians on YouTube

The Bible provides an important resource by which Christians of all denominations understand the world, but for Evangelical Christians, Bible-reading is of particular, foundational importance (Packer, 1978). In the Evangelical community, reading and interpreting the Bible is an important practice not only for convincing others about the validity of particular beliefs, but also for influencing the development of the social context within which discussion takes place. The reading and interpretation of the Bible serves both a theological purpose, allowing readers to provide textual evidence for beliefs, and a practical social purpose, allowing users to map their own and others' actions onto biblical texts to either condone or condemn them. For readers who share a belief in the importance of the Bible in making moral judgements, the biblical text can be a particularly useful tool to position oneself and one's actions. The Bible is not only seen as an authority to which readers can appeal, but a way of understanding and describing social life, one with both the power to make sense of other people's actions as well as to influence how social life develops. This article traces the way that readers position themselves in relation to others by reading and interpreting the Bible and then using it to make moral judgements about others.

For Christians arguing on the popular video-sharing website YouTube, reading and interpreting the Bible is an important practice both in convincing others of the validity of one's beliefs, and in influencing how one and one's actions are viewed in the community. YouTube does not have 'gate-keeping' (i.e. access-restricting) devices requiring its users to make a particular effort to become a part of a particular community. Individual users interact with a broad range of other users who might or might not share the same beliefs or cultural context. Moreover, the differences in background among users can lead to complications, particularly when users are attempting to self-categorise and establish their identity on the site. While initially self-identifying 'Christians' might see themselves as affiliated with one another, over time users can become aware of differing beliefs and may find categorical affiliation problematic as the categories might mean different things to different people. For example, 'Christian' can have different implications for Catholics and Protestants (Pihlaja, 2014b).

Given this complicated environment, users must then find other resources for differentiating themselves from others who may share the same categorical identity (i.e. 'Christian'), but not

necessarily the same beliefs. Additionally, as a social network, YouTube is a space of 'context collapse' (Marwick and boyd, 2011) in which users must appeal to a diverse audience, with a multiplicity of actual viewers, while at the same time maintaining their own voice and authenticity. This is particularly difficult when users taking a position of 'Christian authority' on the site might face resistance not only from atheists, but also from other Christians who disagree with their particular theological position. The 'Christian community' of users might then include a diverse range of users who do not necessarily accept the legitimacy of each other's views.

1.2 *Positioning theory*

The Bible therefore becomes a very important resource in these communities as a way to perform an authoritative voice. To expose how this process works, I will employ positioning analysis (Davies and Harré, 1990; Harré and Van Langenhove, 1998, 2008; Harré et al., 2009). Positioning offers a useful tool for describing how users talk about their own actions and the actions of others, and offers a way to trace the dynamic nature of positions over time. Conceived first by Davies and Harré (1990), Harré and Van Langenhove (1998) subsequently expanded positioning analysis to describe 'the discursive construction of personal stories that make a person's actions intelligible and relatively determinate as social acts...' (Harré and Van Langenhove, 2008: 16) and the concept of 'position' offers an alternative to the concept of 'roles' in social interaction (Davies and Harré, 1990: 45). In positioning, analysts do not view social behaviour as a response to social 'stimulus'. Instead, they are 'concerned with revealing the explicit and implicit patterns of reasoning that are realized in the ways that people act towards others' (Harré et al., 2009: 5–6). Harré and colleagues' (2009: 9) work on positioning argues that social positions taken by individuals are not static, but rather shift dynamically in different contexts, with relationships negotiated in real-time exchanges. Instead of attempting to uncover or analyse a person's 'identity' as a stable artefact, positioning is primarily interested in how positions are realised at specific points in an interaction. Analysts can then reveal not only how individuals view themselves, but how contexts (both in terms of the specific interaction and larger

socio-historical factors) provide and limit the positions users can take within larger storylines.

Harré and Van Langenhove (1998) describe several different kinds of positioning.

- First-order positioning can either be explicit, as in the use of categories, or tacit, in which the storyline implies a position that is not explicitly stated.
- Second-order positioning occurs when a position is contested within a conversation and negotiation of positions results.
- Third-order positioning occurs when the negotiation of a position happens outside of the conversation where the initial position was established.

Harré and Van Langenhove (1998: 20) describe positioning with the following example: Jones tells Smith, 'Please, iron my shirts.' This demand positions Jones as someone with moral authority, namely the authority to demand that Smith iron the shirts. Smith, in response to Jones, has the option to accept this positioning and Jones' moral authority to make the demand, or Smith may contest the positioning, and suggest that Jones does not have the moral authority to make the demand. What storyline emerges will depend on how Jones responds to Smith: one in which Jones and Smith are in conflict, or one in which the authority and obligations of both are accepted. The storyline and positions are also embedded in the cultural and socio-historical context of the interaction. This will affect what positions and storylines are available to interactants.

Positioning analysis has been employed in descriptions of conflict to uncover symmetrical storylines told by opponents, by displaying how people 'define and allocate positions for their rivals' (Harré, 2004; Harré et al., 2009: 9). Because positions are not static roles, the analyst takes into account how positions shift over time, including within individual instances of interaction. Positions are dynamic, but can also be stable over time, or shift gradually or immediately, depending on the context of any given stretch of discourse or the social situation. Analysis of positioning can also be used to see how individuals take similar positions in different contexts. Harré's (2004) study of the positions allocated in discourse about terrorism has shown the ways in which positioning can function in relation to conflicting discourses. The

heroes in one discourse can be positioned as villains in competing discourses, and vice versa.

Sabat's (2003) studies of positioning in talk about Alzheimer's patients have shown that positioning can become *malignant*, that is, positioning which leads to stereotyping and negativity directed at the individual being positioned. Although positioning is dynamic and contextual, set ways of talking about others can become embedded in discourse – in this case, about particular illnesses. The positioning of Alzheimer's patients that Sabat observes is part of a larger social and historical approach to the particular illness. Positions and storylines can become common in particular contexts or cultures, providing resources (especially metaphorical resources; compare with Musolff, 2004) for people to understand the social world. The storylines embedded in common discourses can offer speakers set ways of talking about the social world, with the positions available to interactants limited in some ways by the stories and narratives that are available. If, for example, stories tend to feature heroes and villains, positioning of others within the same story will include these positions and make sense of the social world employing these positions.

Bamberg (1997) has further extended the concept of *positioning* to take into account the different levels of positioning within stories. Bamberg considers three levels of positioning in relations to stories being told. First, there is the actual content of the story being told. Second, there is the interaction between the interactants, between the teller of the story and the hearer. Finally, the third level of positioning relates to how the narrator sees themselves in the social world, above the context of the one interaction. By taking into account more than one level in analysis of positioning, the connections between the immediate context of interaction and the larger social discourses about particular issues can be identified. By understanding positioning on these different levels, the researcher can consider how speaker discourse appropriates or subverts storylines and how this analysis can make sense of social interaction.

For this analysis, I focus primarily on how Christian YouTube users position themselves in relation to one another and the community that they address. My analysis uses a discursive approach to positioning (Bamberg, 1997, 2004), identifying positions not as artefacts of discourse that can be labelled and applied, but as emergent in the interaction between the different levels of positioning suggested by Bamberg (2004). This article

investigates the Bible as a particular resource of third-level positions and storylines, and asks how these positions and storylines affect the social interaction of users as they read and interpret the Bible. The Bible provides not only the theological basis for faith, but also a collection of stories and positions for Christian users to take up in interaction, positions which offer implicit authority. Analysis will therefore seek to uncover how reading and interpreting the Bible is affected by the affordances of social media, particularly YouTube, and how it affects the development of the social world.

2 Sheep and wolves

The data for this article are drawn from a longitudinal study of a group of Christians over a period of three years. Previous analysis of the users has focused on the use of antagonism in the community (Pihlaja, 2014a), the role of metaphor in interaction (Pihlaja, 2013) and the use of categories (Pihlaja, 2014b). In this article, I analyse new content from the community, looking specifically at how scripture is used in interaction to effect social change. The analysis covers two videos in particular. The first one is made by the Evangelical Christian user Yokeup, entitled 'Straight up....Wolves and Garbage.. call it what it is' and posted in March of 2009. The second video is entitled 'We Can't Choose Our Brothers' by the user christoferL, posted earlier in 2009, but presented as a rebuttal of many of Yokeup's recurrent arguments about the ways Christians should act on the site. Neither video remains available on the site.

The interaction analysed in this article revolves around a larger argument in the Christian community of YouTube users. Users like Yokeup argued for Christians on the site to take a hard line about what they felt were fundamental principles in Christian belief, especially by being aggressive in confronting non-Christians with the 'reality' of hell. Others, including christoferL, argued that Christians must take a more conciliatory stance on the site, showing love and acceptance to other users, while still 'preaching the word' and expressing unpopular beliefs. The difference between these two users was often one of style rather than substance, with very little distance between them in terms of theology. Regardless, in disagreements about how to best approach others on the site, the reading and interpretation of the Bible played a key role in argumentation. This article will look at

how the Bible is used in positioning users in relation to these arguments.

2.1 *Positioning with the text*

In the video entitled 'Straight up....Wolves and Garbage.. call it what it is', Yokeup warns Christians that there are many 'wolves' on YouTube, using the imagery of 'wolves and sheep to' talk about others in the YouTube community. Yokeup speaks as follows, beginning with a quotation from Ezekiel 22:27,

'Her princes in the midst thereof are like wolves ravening the prey to shed blood and to destroy souls to get dishonest gain. Destroy souls.'... Let me keep going <laughs> Zephaniah 3:3 'Her princes within her are roaring lions. Her judges are evening wolves, they gnaw not the bones till the mor- the morrow.'

Yokeup's use of the Bible begins with a reading of two passages of Old Testament scripture: Ezekiel 22:27 and Zephaniah 3:3. In these verses, princes are like wolves or lions ravaging a queen and doing violence. In their original contexts, the verses are prophecies about the destruction of Jerusalem, not warnings for Christians to be alert and careful to discern true and false Christians. Although the two passages come from different parts of the Bible and address ostensibly quite different issues, the imagery of predatory animals — wolves and lions — allows Yokeup to connect them. In making this connection, Yokeup adheres to a well-documented Evangelical belief that the whole of the Bible has a single 'common meaning', allowing one passage to be read as the interpretation or continuation of another, even if they originate in different contexts (Malley, 2004).

Metaphorical language such as that included in the prophecies above requires interpretive work. Some biblical stories present explicit interpretations for the figurative language they contain (e.g. Matthew 13:1–23), but others do not explicate themselves in this way (e.g. John 15:1–17). While the explanation provided by Jesus for certain parables could imply the existence of a single, authoritative meaning for every piece of metaphorical language in the Bible, in practice, other passages appear to be more open with regard to their range of possible meanings. To understand biblical passages with ambiguous meanings, Evangelicals often appeal to other biblical passages, in the conviction that the Bible

is not a collection of texts authored by human beings living in different historical periods, but a single, divinely-authored text, every part of which expresses a common meaning. For Evangelicals, exegesis of one biblical passage with another is a common practice in offline environments (Malley, 2004). Given the influence of biblical hermeneutics on secular literary interpretation in the Western world (Noakes, 1992), it is perhaps unsurprising that similar interpretive practices should also have been observed in group readings of contemporary imaginative texts (e.g. Allington, 2007).

This possibility for interpretation of the text creates an affordance for positioning. Where the meaning of a parable is not explicit, readers and listeners are implicitly invited to interpret the text and draw analogies from it, enabling the metaphorical language in the text to be read as a template for understanding larger issues in their own social worlds: another finding from Malley's (2004) work on Bible study groups. The text serves as not only a theological resource, but also a practical one, providing ready-made storylines and positions that users can then mobilise to talk about others. In the local, offline context, this practice is mediated and moderated by others who interact around the same topic. The same practice is replicated in the YouTube video, as Yokeup uses both passages together to organise a narrative about interaction between Christians on the site.

After reading directly from the Bible in the first part of the video, Yokeup moves on to explicate the text, applying it to the social situation on the site. Because of the recurrence of the word 'wolves', he is able to connect the above-quoted Old Testament prophecies with Matthew 7:15 that contains a warning from Jesus to avoid false prophets: 'Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves.' Yokeup then makes implicit reference to another biblical story involving sheep and wolves, this time taken from a parable in Matthew 7:

What I've noticed with the huggy crowd. And the whole huggy idea and concept that... bothers me, is that, number one: you don't recognise the-the seriousness of the wolves, that they're out to seek and to destroy. And so you — there's never, you know, time to sit there and say, 'Well, you're just a brother that has a different opinion.'

At this point in the Yokeup's discourse, the 'wolves' from the Zephaniah passage are not simply predators but tricksters. This makes sense because of Jesus's metaphorical categorisation of the false prophet who sneaks in among the religious faithful as a 'wolf in sheep's clothing': a categorisation that can affect the meaning of Old Testament references to wolves because of the Evangelical practice of interpreting one biblical passage in terms of another, regardless of context. Thus, Yokeup's use of 'sheep' and 'wolves' both echoes Old Testament prophecies featuring sheep and wolves and treats those prophecies as interchangeable with New Testament stories involving metaphorical references to the same animals. Words from Ezekiel 22:27 and from Matthew 7:15 are used without clear differentiation between the two sources. In the subsequent talk about the passages, elements from the stories come together without Yokeup ever telling the listener that this is what he is doing. Instead of providing such an explanation within the video, he copied and pasted the relevant biblical passages into the description box below it, providing a textual authority for the discursive work he performs. The inclusion of the text then reinforces Yokeup's position as one that is explicitly biblical, the word-for-word text of the Bible.

The quoting and use of scripture in this way, however, does not serve an explicit theological purpose; it is instead a resource and tool for judging others within the community. Yokeup refers to the 'huggy crowd', by which he means Christian users on the site that he felt were too eager to make concessions about their faith in order to be liked by others. The scripture then provides an authoritative basis for making this judgement by positioning the 'huggy crowd' as deceived by the 'wolves' from the passage. By drawing a comparison between the users he dislikes and the storyline of 'wolves' and 'sheep' from the text, the story positions some Christians in the community as attempting to harm others, while other Christians don't 'recognise the seriousness' of the threat. This narrative is then linked to a 'master narrative' from the biblical text in the same utterance: 'You don't recognise the-the seriousness of the wolves that they're out to seek and to destroy.' The positions of the biblical narrative and positions of the users in the YouTube conflict converge implicitly when the 'wolves' metaphor is employed.

The positioning of others using a larger biblical narrative shows the importance of Bamberg's (2004) second level of positioning,

which takes into account the interaction between the teller of the story and the hearer. Yokeup is telling a story of Christians being deceived by other Christians on the site: a narrative that he understands by reference to passages quoted from the Bible. The video is, however, made for an audience which includes both users involved in the interaction and viewers who might not necessarily be involved. Reading and interpreting the Bible in this way does not just serve to judge YouTube users Yokeup disagrees with, but also to draw others in and convince them of Yokeup's positioning of himself as a 'sheep' warning other sheep about the threat of the 'wolf.' The story includes an implicit call to action, to identify potential threats in the community and expel them. The actual video viewer, however, may differ from the audience Yokeup understands himself to address, leading to further confusion about who the 'wolves' are, and about who it is that must be opposed.

2.2 Supporting the positioning of others

Given the open nature of YouTube and the ability of any user to view the video, confusion about who Yokeup is speaking to might be expected; however, the users who comment on the video appear not to be confused, recognising who it is that Yokeup is speaking about. The Christian user mackiemoo writes,

There are def. wolves in the world, absolutely.. A very thought provoking video first thing in the morning!!

mackiemoo's response to Yokeup shows the effectiveness of his revoicing and appropriation of the language of the Bible. mackiemoo's comment also includes the phrase 'says it all right there', appealing to some common Evangelical Christian knowledge embedded in the use of biblical language. mackiemoo does not further explain what she means by this phrase, suggesting a shared knowledge with Yokeup and signalling affiliation with him. Responding through a shared 'repertoire' (Potter and Wetherell, 1987) is an important marker of membership in a community: here, the community of Evangelical Christians. As users employing recognised language from the text, they invoke the powerful voice of the text (Bakhtin, 1981) and the second-order discourses that have accumulated around it (Foucault, 1981, 1993; see Allington, 2006: 129). Rather than

'shared jargon', which Herring (2004) suggests is characteristic of online communities and implies the use of words containing lexical information only known to the users, mackiemoo's comment signals a shared repertoire and with it, shared beliefs. The words themselves 'say it all' for her.

Christian YouTubers encourage Yokeup's use of scripture in the way that he has by quoting or alluding to other biblical passages involving sheep, as seen in the following comment:

strong stuff brother...what, can't we all just get along? just kiddin', Jesus came to cause division and divide the sheep from the goats...so many still see Jesus as a baby that never grew up...not a Man who spoke with both compassion and sternness [sic] when either was required.

In this comment, the user grafdale1 alludes to a biblical parable in Matthew 25 regarding the coming judgement of the world, in which the sheep are separated from the goats. As above, shared knowledge about the parable is assumed, particularly Jesus's implication in the passage that many who think they are his followers will ultimately be sent to hell because they failed to do his will: grafdale1 appeals to the shared belief that s/he and Yokeup hold that discerning between real and false Christians is biblical. grafdale1's message reinforces and echoes Yokeup's message about the 'huggy crowd' that many Christian users prefer a weak, peaceful message over the 'true' Christian message.

The feedback from these users also suggests that the second level of positioning —the interaction between Yokeup as story teller and the audience as hearer — is effective in that users accept Yokeup's interpretation of other users' interaction and support it with positive comments. They recognise and engage in the same storylines that Yokeup has employed, using the positions of 'sheep' and 'wolves' to talk about the YouTube context in the same way as Yokeup. The use of the Bible then affords a short cut to acceptance of Yokeup's position, because his positioning of others within the authoritative biblical storyline fits affiliated users' own positioning of themselves within the same storyline.

2.3 *Mixing biblical passages*

Yokeup's use of the Bible to position others was in no way unique. One of the members of the 'huggy crowd', the Christian user christoferL, also employed Bible narratives and storylines to describe the community. Unlike Yokeup, christoferL encourages Christians not to judge one another in his video, 'We Can't Choose Our Brothers':

On judgement day if you're so blessed as to be one of the sheep and not one of the goats, your vote won't matter, if that guy you said wasn't your brother in Christ is standing there <laughs> with the sheep as well.

Like grafdale1's comment above, christoferL draws on the parable of the sheep and the goats from Matthew 25. He uses 'sheep' in the same way that Yokeup does, but referring to a different parable, one in which 'wolves' are not present, but 'goats' are. The change in positions, distinguishing between goats and sheep rather than sheep and wolves, highlights christoferL's different approach to the community. Rather than view others as potential threats, he de-emphasises the responsibility of individual users to expose 'wolves', instead suggesting a different set of responsibilities and obligations. The storyline of this parable does not imply an obligation for sheep to warn others, but only an obligation for them to accept the judgement of Christ.

The uses of different passages of scripture together does not seem to require congruency in a literal sense (as humans do not stand among the sheep, and sheep and goats are not normally judged) because the hearer can use his or her own understanding of scripture to make sense of the positioning. Moreover, like Yokeup, christoferL's positioning of others mixes different parts of scripture in an unmarked way, moving from reference to 'sheep and goats' to 'brothers'. Within the Matthew 7 parable, there are no 'brothers', but because both 'sheep' and 'brothers' in their respective stories refer to 'followers of Christ', christoferL is able to make reference to both passages without explaining the mixing of references. christoferL's reading and use does not contradict the assumed meaning of the text, and the incongruous use of different metaphors is successful for users who share the same belief about the Bible.

In the same video, christoferL goes on to describe the interaction between users, appealing to several other biblical storylines:

We can look at somebody and say, 'Well, they have bad fruit so they can't possibly be my brother in Christ.' But Christ said, 'Pull the plank out of your own eye so you can remove the speck out of your brother's.' And to that end... It's up to God. It's up to Jesus to decide who's really his. Not us. And I say this not only as a rebuke against judging someone that's not being a brother but to those who have been told, 'You're not my brother in Christ.' Because it is a painful thing to hear. That's why Catholics and Protestants have been arguing for the last thousand years. Because it's hurtful to tell someone else they're not following Christ when they believe they are.

In this brief section, christoferL conflates several biblical references, including the parable of the vine and branches (John 15), the removal of a speck from another's eye (Matthew 7), and the frequent biblical storyline of God as father and his followers as children and as brothers and sisters (e.g. Matthew 12:48–50). These different references all fit into a master narrative about the role of God as judge and humans as judged. By patching together several biblical stories to make his point, christoferL positions Christians such as Yokeup as disregarding this storyline, by being judgemental and rejecting the biblical imperative to love others. Moreover, he refers to a historical storyline of arguments between Catholics and Protestants to further position Christians who adopt Yokeup's approach as divisive, the same as people with planks in their own eyes in Matthew 7. The use of scripture in this way shows a clear ability to create a consistent narrative about another user drawing on the authority of biblical stories and positions.

2.4 Accessing and understanding the common meaning

Rather than view different passages as different stories, both Yokeup and christoferL are able to make their arguments by assuming that storylines appearing in different parts of the Bible are the same: that is, that different parts of the Bible tell the same story. For both of these YouTube users, the third-level of positioning — the ideological, master narrative about interaction among Christians, non-Christians, and God — is consistent across the text. Where positions are indexed with the same words (for example, when the stories share common elements like 'wolves' and 'sheep') the stories are effectively interchangeable

and can be used in different configurations to describe the social world. Even when the stories do not share common elements, but common referents (for example, when followers of Christ are referred to using diverse metaphors such as 'sheep', 'fruit', and 'brothers'), the passages can be used interchangeably to describe the social world of the site.

This patching together of various biblical passages to fit a consistent master narrative appears natural for Yokeup and christoferL, but it is not a resource available to all users. Employing biblical language in the way that Yokeup and christoferL do requires knowledge of the Bible together with particular shared beliefs about how it should be read. An example of a failed attempt to access the register to challenge Yokeup can be seen in a later exchange which took place in the comments on Yokeup's video. The user muchtribulation responds to Yokeup's video saying, 'Which type of person would most likely possess guns, "wolf" or "sheep"?' muchtribulation's reference to guns in relation to sheep and wolves appears to be a challenge to Yokeup's public position on firearms and the necessity of violence in some situations. Yokeup's response, 'ever read Proverbs?', alludes to passages in Proverbs which Yokeup reads to endorse violence and the ownership of weapons, but Yokeup neither indicates which passages he has in mind nor explains why he interprets them in this way. Instead, his response suggests the meaning is obvious. If muchtribulation does not understand this reference, s/he confirms Yokeup's implication of his/her lack of knowledge about the Bible (or, more specifically, Yokeup's understanding of how the Bible should be read), which is sufficient to disqualify him/her from taking part in the discussion.

This exchange shows the limits of using the Bible in online settings, particularly when considering Bamberg's (2004) second level of positioning, which takes into account the relationship of the story teller and the hearer. Users with knowledge of typical readings of the Bible related to particular beliefs about the Bible are not challenged, as seen above with the comment by mackiemoo, whereas muchtribulation's attempt to employ positions from the storyline apparently fails. muchtribulation seeks to challenge Yokeup, but is unsuccessful because his use of the Bible does not fit the assumed common meaning embedded in the storyline. In muchtribulation's reading, 'sheep' means 'nonviolent people' rather than 'followers of Christ', and 'wolves' means 'violent people' rather than 'false prophets'. Yokeup

responds by suggesting that muchtribulation is simply not aware of biblical passages supporting the use of violence which invalidate his/her reading. A lack of shared belief is evident, as muchtribulation does not appear to understand the teaching of the whole of the Bible in the 'right' way: that is, in a way that Yokeup and his peers regard as appropriate.

The exchange between Yokeup and muchtribulation potentially highlights differences in shared knowledge embedded in a shared repertoire. Evangelical Christian YouTube users are able to mix biblical metaphors such as 'sheep' and 'brothers' in a way that makes sense to other Evangelical Christian YouTube users, but muchtribulation's attempt to engage in this practice did not have the same persuasive force. Yokeup's response challenges muchtribulation's implication that Christians should be peaceful, but that is not an assumption that someone aligned with Yokeup's understanding of the Bible would make. Moreover, their beliefs are not about single passages from the Bible and those passage's interpretations, but a comprehensive understanding of the whole Bible. Use of language from the Bible which signals a perceived common meaning allows users to identify others with whom they may share similar beliefs. When people display the right beliefs in a recognisable way, it can become a means for identifying potential users with whom to align as well as for identifying users who do not share the same view of the Bible's common meaning.

3 Conclusion

While online environments may offer open forums for interaction among a range of different users with the potential for novel and creative discussions about religion and spirituality to emerge, the reality of interaction such as that analysed in this article suggests that user positions and storylines are often derived from common offline ways of reading the Bible. These readings and interpretations of the Bible can be adapted to dynamic online spaces to map the positions and storylines from the text onto a particular argument. They provide a common resource for users from different backgrounds and contexts, but sharing the same belief. This allows for stories about interaction on the site to be understood through larger master narratives and can be used to affect the interaction between the video makers and the viewer. In their assumption that the appearance of similar metaphors in different parts of the Bible permits those parts to be drawn

together in a single argument, these users appeal to the Evangelical idea that every part of the Bible expresses a common meaning which is the ultimate authority with regard to questions of correct conduct. Their reading and interpretation of scripture can therefore be used both in claiming authority within their community, and in positioning themselves and their actions, influencing the subsequent discourse and the emerging social context. Online reading and interpretation of the Bible thus serves as a way of allowing Evangelical Christian Internet users to affiliate with others who share their belief that the Bible lends authority to particular positions and courses of action.

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