

**Religionism, Personal Liberty and Absolute Truth:  
Why Personal Liberty and Religionism are Incompatible, as  
Demonstrated by the Recent Events Following the Release of the  
Film, *The Innocence of Muslims*.**

Jessica Swallow

**Introduction**

Religionism is a term that was introduced by John Hull to refer both to the view that one's own religion is true to a degree that is denied to other religions, and to the sense of superiority about the truth of one's own religion that manifests as intolerance towards adherents of other religions (Hull, 1992 cited in Barnes, 2006:401). My claim is that religious belief, as it actually is today, is incompatible with a social climate of tolerance and personal liberty, because it entails religionism. I am careful make explicit that my claim is not that religious belief *necessarily* entails religionism but that, while it does, as it seems to today for many, it undermines a more desirable social order. This can be seen in the violent retaliation for the mockery of Islam in *The Innocence of Muslims*.

**Does Religious Belief Entail Religionism, and Why Does it Matter?**

Religious belief would not be incompatible with a social climate of tolerance and personal liberty if religious believers could be "epistemologically humble" (Teece, 2005 cited in Barnes, 2006:402), i.e. if they could "conclude that their own religious convictions are no better warranted than the religious convictions of others" (*Ibid.*). I am aware of the irony of arguing for a greater degree of tolerance on the one hand, while, on the other, denying the desirability of religion; I might have argued that religious believers ought to be more modest about their beliefs, but the difficulty is that this simply does not conform to the standards that the various religions set out for themselves: they are fundamentally incompatible with the kind of modesty that I might have liked to suggest they should adopt.

The stakes are high. Either religious believers *can* be epistemologically humble about their beliefs, so religious belief does not entail religionism, or religious believers *cannot* be epistemologically humble, religious belief does entail religionism, and there is a choice to be made between religion and a social climate of tolerance and personal liberty.

So what is it about religion that runs contrary to epistemological humbleness? First is the contemporary self-understanding of most religious adherents. Religious identities tend to be exclusive in a way that cultural and ethnic identities are not. While someone might be African-American or Anglo-Indian, this kind of complementary relation does not exist between different religions. People *convert* to one or another on the belief that the new one is true to a degree denied to others; one can generally be a Buddhist or a Hindu, a Muslim or a Christian, but not both.

This is because of the doctrinal logic of the different religions, which is religion's second point of departure from the possibility of epistemological humbleness. Religious adherents don't regard other religions as complementary to their own because they often endorse contradictory doctrines; for example, Christians believe that God is personal and Trinitarian, while Jews and Muslims also believe that he is personal, but deny that he is

Trinitarian. Conversely, Advaita Hindus believe that the divine is impersonal, while Theravada Buddhists deny the existence of any substantial reality, divine or otherwise (Barnes, 2006:404). So religions differ in fundamental ways, and each claims itself to be true. To admit to the kind of fallibility that would be necessary for one to be modest about one's own religious beliefs, would be akin to admitting fallibility of the divine word — something that mere mortals cannot do. Christians, for example, would not be able to believe that Jesus was the son of God, because this entails that Christianity has a uniqueness that must be denied to other religions.

It may be possible for religions to redefine themselves so that it would not be logically contradictory for someone to adhere to one while maintaining epistemological humbleness. However, what I want to make explicit is the idea that the notion of absolute truth that is present in, and fundamental to, religious belief today is incompatible with modesty and an admission of fallibility, which, in turn, makes it incompatible with the more desirable end of a social climate of tolerance and personal liberty.

So far I have proposed that there is a kind of dogmatism, borne out of a sense of the absolute truth of the claims of one's own religion, which prohibits epistemological humbleness. I feel it necessary to spend a moment explaining what I mean here by absolute truth, and, conversely, by truth as a fallible entity. I will then explain how it is possible to make value-judgements without absolutism, and then I will return to the discussion of religion within the context of the desirability of personal liberty over the kind of religious belief behind the outrage at *The Innocence of Muslims*.

## Truth

Many of us have a sense in which there is some transcendent order of truths, be they moral, scientific, or otherwise. Should I save one person or five in the runaway train thought experiment (Foot, 1967)? Does the Earth orbit the Sun or vice versa? These questions ought to have a 'right' answer.

To say that there is an absolute truth of the matter would be to say that there is a 'right' answer that will always be right in all circumstances, it is just a matter of discovering it. To claim that there is a truth of the matter, but that it is a fallible one, is to say that a particular hypothesis (for example, that the Earth orbits the Sun) *becomes* true once it is validated, and *ceases to be* true if it is then falsified. It is upon this premise that modern science tends to operate.

To recap, my proposal is that religion is based on an out-dated version of truth (i.e. that it is absolute), which cannot be reconciled with modern society. If I know that the Earth orbits the Sun, and I *know* that I know it (because I know it absolutely), then I can be dogmatic about it. I could refuse to listen to arguments to the contrary, and I might even berate those who advocate that position. Ultimately, it makes me an intolerant bigot. Of course, not all religious believers are intolerant bigots, but I believe that this must be because they are *personally* able to be modest about their beliefs, not because they are conforming to the standards of their religion.

So how can we make sense of a truth that is fallibly known? In order to explain this position, I refer to William James's discussion of truth in *The Will to Believe* (1896). First, he makes a dogmatic claim that truth exists. Certain hypotheses are either alive or dead to us, where a live hypothesis is one that "appeals as a real possibility to him to whom it is proposed" (1896:92), and a dead hypothesis is one that does not mean anything to him to whom it is proposed. For example, my belief in the primacy of science is a live hypothesis to me, while a belief in the Madhi is a dead one. So deadness and liveliness are not intrinsic properties of the belief, but a relation to an individual believer.

Although we cannot will certain hypotheses alive or dead, our will does have a part to play

inasmuch as we believe certain things given our particular combination of fears, hopes, prejudices, passions, and circumstances of caste, etc. By contrast to Peirce's disdain for the 'method of authority' (through which individuals come to hold certain beliefs because of some kind of indoctrination) (Peirce, 1877:44-45), James embraces it. There are plenty of things that we believe in on someone else's authority (such as the existence of molecules and the conservation of energy, democracy and necessary progress), and "Our reason is quite satisfied, in nine hundred and ninety-nine cases out of every thousand of us, if it can find a few arguments that will do to recite in case our credulity is criticised by someone else" (James, 1896:96).

If I take the belief in the existence of truth as an example of one such belief that I may have reached either on someone else's say-so or through exercise of my own rationality, it follows that we believe in truth because we want there to be a truth of the matter, not because logic tells us that it exists absolutely. It suits us for there to be certain things that are true and others that are false. If there were no truth then all of our scientific endeavours would be in vain. If, "[as] a rule we disbelieve all facts and theories for which we have no use" (James, 1896:96), then we certainly have good reason for taking the existence of truth to be a fact. Recognising 'the existence of truth' to be just another example of fallible knowledge – as we must do if we are to be empiricists – it is clear that the notion of absolute truth simply is not tenable.

All of this is not to *deny* that there is ultimately some *absolute* truth of the matter, but it is a re-characterisation of truth as a *property* of an idea that *happens* to it when it is validated. Although there may well be an absolute truth of the matter, we couldn't know it absolutely because we couldn't distinguish it from all of our other truths that we have admitted to knowing fallibly. If knowledge of truth is fluid then we ought to be more modest when we believe that we have reached it; we can be dogmatic when it seems useful to be, or when we have no reason as yet to disbelieve the hypothesis is question, as long as we are *aware* that we are being dogmatic. For example, I might believe in Santa. My belief on a day-to-day basis is a dogmatic one because I don't tend to question it; however, if I were to reflect upon my belief, I might admit to its fallibility. This is how I might avoid falling out with a Swedish friend who believes that Jultomten, the mischievous elf, brings the presents, or another friend who believes that Santa doesn't exist at all! We might all stick to our own preferred story, but our admission of fallibility means that each of us can understand why the others might believe something entirely different.

This brings me back to my earlier characterisation of James' belief in the existence of truth as a dogmatic one. In line with James, from this point, I will take it for granted.

So, as discussed, we can talk about truth in two ways: in empiricist language (we can attain truth but we cannot infallibly know it), or in absolutist language (not only can we attain truth, but we can know that we have attained it). There are some things that we do know absolutely (for example, that two is less than three, and if all men are mortal then I am mortal too). Because these kinds of statements "illumine my intellect irresistibly," (James, 1896:98), I am inclined to believe that I can be certain that I know something; I am inclined to believe in the possibility of objective evidence. As can be understood from the preceding discussion, through a Jamesian lens, objective evidence does not really exist. Apart from abstract propositions of comparison that tell us nothing about concrete reality, "we find no proposition ever regarded by any one as evidently certain that has not either been called a falsehood or at least had its truth sincerely questioned by some one else" (James, 1896:99).

"Objective evidence is never triumphantly there" (*ibid.*); it is merely an *ideal* notion. If we are modest in our claim to have knowledge, letting go of the notion that we can ever *know* that what we know will stand as knowledge forever because it reflects some sense

in which the world *absolutely is*, then we can understand this claim. In other words, there is never the kind of evidence, in human experience, which can prove to us, once and for all, that the knowledge that we possess now will be knowledge forever.

This is not meant to be a pessimistic statement. To give up on absolute truth is not to give up on truth altogether. We can continue to come up with better ways to explain the universe, or our place in it, without a need for an ultimate goal of reaching something absolute. This is why, for James, it does not matter *why* an individual holds a certain hypothesis. Whether his tutor dictated it to him, whether it is a socially acceptable position to take, or whether he reached it through the exercise of his own rationality, “if the total drift of thinking continues to confirm it, that is what he means by its being true” (James, 1896:100).

So, in science, we have found it better to operate according to an empiricist conception of truth. I propose that this may well be the case for morality. But the problem is that, all the while people adhere to religious belief, their conception of morality will remain within the limitations of their particular religion. We need a morality that evolves with society, just as we need our scientific ‘truths’ to evolve with an ever-transforming scientific paradigm. As we become more tolerant, or come to expect more personal liberties, so our morality should demand it.

If an evolving morality can be contained within a particular religion, then it should undergo whatever revisions necessary to make that possible, making it compatible with the values of modern society. Religious texts are meant to be timeless interpretations of the divine word. But it is no longer appropriate to kill homosexuals (Lev. 20:13) or disobedient children (Deut. 21:18-21), and yet these commands remain in the Bible. This need not be a problem if we can rely upon modern religious authorities to reinterpret the word of God according to our evolving society – for the most part this is a successful project. But sometimes, even today, retributive actions are taken because a ‘crime’ has been committed against God, or Mohammed, which simply are not appropriate for today’s society.

Before I give an example of the religiously motivated retribution that I am criticising, I will explain what it is about modern (Western) society that I think is more desirable than a society run according to (absolute) divine law.

### **Translating the fallibility of scientific knowledge into the moral arena**

In *A Pragmatist View of Rationality and Cultural Difference*, Rorty notes three senses of the term ‘rationality’ (1992:581):

1. Rationality<sub>1</sub> denotes an ability to cope with one’s environment by adjusting one’s reactions appropriately according to relevant environmental stimuli. In this sense, all successful living things (insofar as they manage to survive) are rational, though the complexity of adaptation is a mark of a greater or lesser degree of rationality.
2. Rationality<sub>2</sub> is of a different kind. It is something that humans uniquely possess, and it enables us to organise our desires in value terms (sometimes prioritising ends contradictory to survival) while providing us with the means to serve them, rather than just providing the means to some, more instinctive, ends.
3. Rationality<sub>3</sub> “is the virtue which enables individuals and communities to coexist peacefully with other individuals and communities, to live and let live, and to put together new, syncretic, compromised, ways of life” (1992:581). In other words, it is roughly synonymous with tolerance.

In line with Rorty, I believe that we can make value-judgements through exercise of rationalities<sub>1</sub> and <sub>3</sub>, and we can do away with rationality<sub>2</sub> completely. In other words, we don’t need there to be any *absolute* sense of value in order to talk about how we ought to

behave.

Rorty explains how the connection between rationalities<sub>1</sub> and <sub>3</sub> might play out. To make things simpler, he equates rationality<sub>1</sub> with efficiency, and rationality<sub>3</sub> with tolerance. As more efficient technology becomes available, the more readily we accept new ways of doing things that differ from those of our ancestors, so the more we become receptive to the idea that good ideas might come from anywhere. True to pragmatist fashion, Rorty explains that this connection is not a necessary one. This much is obvious: it is conceivable that increased efficiency through improved technology could be used to oppress rather than liberate, “So there is nothing *intrinsically* emancipatory about a greater degree of rationality<sub>1</sub>” (1992:587). Yet, in practice, technology has never been so advanced as it is today and people have never been as free as they are today.

So if there is no *a priori* reason why increased rationality<sub>1</sub> should lead to increased rationality<sub>3</sub>, why does it seem to have happened that way? Rorty credits the prevalence of Christian rhetoric in Western society for this. A pre-existing value placed on community and brotherhood, as present in Christian thought, in the countries that have been at the forefront of technological advance is what we have to thank: “religious tolerance... became part of the public rhetoric of some of the great imperialist and colonialist powers” (1992:587).

By making this connection, Rorty moves away from the kind of value-judgements involved in rationality<sub>2</sub>. He does not make any claims that improved efficiency or increased tolerance are the ‘right’ goals, just that they are in line with the general trajectory of human social behaviour as it has manifested itself. By freeing ourselves from the shackles of absolute normativity, we can imagine a utopian existence that involves the maximisation of happiness, freedom, richness of experience, i.e. rationality<sub>3</sub>, simply because it seems to be the general preference of humans, not because we have some obligation to realise the true nature of humanity through living in accordance with rationality<sub>2</sub>.

## Personal liberty

I have argued, in line with James, that there is no such thing as objective evidence, so there is no meaningful way in which we can make sense of a concept of absolute truth. From here on in I will take this for granted.

With this in mind I would now like to make another contentious claim: every human deserves personal liberty. I am careful here not to make any claims involving ‘basic rights’, as this would be analogous to the kind of absolute truth that I have just argued the meaninglessness of. In political terms, to talk of a ‘basic human right’ to liberty is akin to talking about some transcendent moral order. It is to give the claim normative force, which it is not clear how to justify. Where would this ‘right’ come from? What, or who, has given it to us? In order to explain this force, it must be assumed either that there is some power, divine or otherwise, that has promised us this right, or that there is some human telos that requires us to be free. These are weighty assumptions to make, and they would require some very persuasive arguments.

I would like to propose that it is better to talk in terms of ‘deserving’ liberty, rather than ‘having the right’ to it, not because I would like to *deny* that we have the ‘right’ — thereby denying that there is some transcendent moral order, — but because I don’t think that such a conception is necessary for the present discussion.

In order to make it clear why this is the case, it would be helpful to explain what I mean by ‘personal liberty’. It is a difficult concept to define because I don’t believe there to be a fully comprehensive list of necessary and sufficient conditions which, if satisfied, would amount to it. Instead I will define it in a loose sense so that the specifics of it might be

adaptable for different cultures or for different times. My conception of personal liberty includes:

- (1) Freedom to participate in government of the community (i.e. in the establishment and reassessment of laws).
- (2) Freedom to be educated, including education in matters that do not pertain to the norms of the community; placing restrictions on education amounts to little more than indoctrination.
- (3) Freedom to believe what I will. To return to my earlier discussion of James' 'live' and 'dead' hypotheses, there are bound to be some beliefs that I hold that you never will, and vice versa. Freedom of belief amounts to an acceptance of this fact; the requirement here is modesty about one's own beliefs.
- (4) Freedom to live my private life as I see fit. Obviously, much of my behaviour will have some impact on other individuals or my community as a whole, but there are certain things (e.g. whether I like marmite on my toast, or whether or not I pray, and to whom) that, taken on their own, will have a negligible impact on anyone else in any practical or measurable sense.
- (5) Freedom of assembly (Dewey, 1939:152). This is the freedom to assemble a group to discuss (or protest) issues of common concern. It might include the freedom to form a new religion and meet with my followers, or freedom to associate with people who are culturally or ethnically different from me.
- (6) Freedom to express my ideas. This freedom would mean that I am able to express the views that I have the related freedom to believe.
- (7) Freedom to live my life free from physical harm from others. This amounts to a confidence that I can walk down the street without being beaten up or pickpocketed.

As I have said, this list may well be an incomplete one. None of these freedoms, alone or in combination, amount to Personal Liberty in any absolute, timeless sense. The purpose of setting out these freedoms at this point is simply to help the reader to understand what I mean when I use the term. Note that I have been careful not to include any freedoms that prescribe any sort of action because, obviously, there will be some actions that infringe upon the above freedoms of others. Perhaps there are examples where an individual's exercise of one of these *inactive* freedoms as I have articulated them may infringe upon another individual's possible exercise of his but, as long as these freedoms do not prescribe action, which I have intended that they do not, I do not believe that this will be the case. So, in the case of freedom 7, the specification of *physical* harm is important. It avoids any questions about what exactly constitutes a harm (which might include emotional harm or any number of other things), as it only encompasses those things that cause me to be anything less than as healthy as I would otherwise naturally be. It is therefore very easy to categorise actions that do or do not violate Freedom 7. Anything that involves words rather than action cannot be guilty of this charge. Understood loosely and generously, I believe that there is no real danger of any of these freedoms contradicting each other.

There is, however, the question of what constitutes emotional harm. Where I am taking freedom from physical harm to be a *basic* freedom, freedom from emotional harm is secondary. It is the kind of thing that we might hope to have if we already also have freedoms 1–7. There may be cases where emotional harm is as damaging (or more so) than physical harm, for example in cases that involve abuse or manipulation children or the mentally handicapped. I do not wish to deny that this exists, but my belief is that these are rare cases in which the justifiability of infringement of the personal liberty of the aggressor must be judged on a case-by-case basis. Emotional harm to able-minded adults, such as through the mockery of religious belief as seen in *The Innocence of Muslims*, cannot be the kind of thing that justifies physical retaliation because the former

cannot be as damaging as the latter.

## The universal desirability of personal liberty

Liberty needs only be understood as something that we *deserve*, rather than have the right to, because I propose that every human would *like* to have liberty as I have characterised it. Assuming that people are generally of sound mind and are without sadistic or masochistic tendencies (these minorities will remain unaccounted for in the present discussion due to constraints of space), I believe that there is no good reason for anyone to not want to have it. By virtue of the fact that every human would *like* to have liberty, it can be understood as a universal desire.

If a scientific hypothesis may be granted the status of 'true' (in the pragmatist sense of the word that I advocated earlier) on the basis of being generally accepted and workable within the current epistemological paradigm, then I would like to propose that a similar status ought to be afforded to moral or political hypotheses. To say that every human 'should' have this degree of liberty, in this framework, is not meant to allude to a transcendent moral order. Instead it is a normative statement inextricably bound to human desire. We 'should' have liberty because our universal desire for it makes it valuable.

I cannot think of any good reason why someone might not desire to have personal liberty. There are plenty of examples through history where tyrants, religious leaders, or autocratic governments might have taken action to diminish *their subjects'* liberty because it was not conducive to the maintenance of their own power, and yet, when it comes to the question of one's own liberty, I don't believe that anyone would sensibly wish to disregard their 'right' to it.

## Contemporary relevance

As I have already proposed, this conception of liberty can be based on an understanding of truth that is free from connotations of the absolute. In this form, it is borne out of modesty and acceptance of fallibility. Further, not only does it not require any absolute moral judgements in order to reach its justifiability, it seems to be incompatible with them: if I claim to be in possession of the absolute truth that, for example, there is a God, then it is difficult to see what that would mean for me if I did not feel some moral urge to convince others that I had got it right and they had got it wrong. This, as a starting point, will not infringe upon their personal liberty. I may present you with very strong evidence (which I would surely have, if I claimed to know, absolutely, unquestionably, that God exists), but it will ultimately be up to you to make up your mind about whether or not you believe me. The problem is that I will pay no attention to *your* arguments to the contrary. If I *know* (and know that I know) that there is a God then why would I waste time listening to you trying to convince me otherwise? Thus, absolutism amounts to dogmatism, which is constituted by arrogance about the truth-status of one's own beliefs. Nevertheless, by ignoring you, I do not infringe upon your personal liberty; absolutism and liberty are not the kinds of things that can be logically contradictory. And yet absolutism, as it manifests itself in today's society as religionism, seems intolerant to the degree that it *actually does* inhibit individuals' liberties.

Taking it for granted that every human deserves liberty, which I have already argued for, there seem to be grounds for criticism of any doctrine which either passively allows no room for them, or actively infringes upon them.

To illustrate this point, I refer to the recent outrage caused by the release, on the 2<sup>nd</sup> July 2012, of a 14-minute trailer for a film called *The Innocence of Muslims* via YouTube. The full-length film never appeared on the Internet. The trailer contains claims about the

prophet Mohammed: it depicts him as a warmongering, rapist paedophile who kills entire tribes of people who refuse to submit to Islam, who forces a woman to become his wife by killing her family and tribe, and who rapes a nine year-old girl. The Arabic-dubbed version appeared online on the 4<sup>th</sup> September and global protest ensued. Over the following few weeks there were riots in more than 20 countries, and many people were killed and injured. Notably, on the 11<sup>th</sup> September, exactly 11 years after the 9/11 attacks, four Americans, including the US Ambassador to Libya, Christopher Stevens, were killed in an attack on the US Consulate in Benghazi. There were also attacks on the US Embassies in Cairo, Yemen, Sudan and Pakistan, to name a few.

I said earlier that if religious believers cannot be epistemologically humble, then religious belief does entail religionism, so there is a choice to be made between religion and a social climate of tolerance and personal liberty. I recognise that the kind of humbleness that I am advocating may have been hard to swallow by those who had been so deeply insulted by the film. I am not denying their right to find it insulting. It was more than just a harmless academic critique of the Qur'an; it was obviously meant to be provocative, so much so that the filmmakers went to great lengths to hide the plot and characters from the cast and crew, who thought that they were making a film about an Egyptian warrior. Any mention of 'Mohammed' or 'Islam' was dubbed, post-production. But when action or retaliation – directed by the divine word or not – amounts to infringement of personal liberty, as the riots did, but the film did not, it is obvious that there has been a wrongdoing.

## Conclusion

I have tried to show that personal liberty is universally desirable. I have also tried to show that mockery of the beliefs of others does not infringe upon their own personal liberty – in fact, it may well be a useful part of debate, as making light of things might loosen the wheels of discussion. I have also tried to show that some formulations of religious belief entail religionism because of the self-understanding of the religious adherents and because of the doctrinal logic of their belief. If religionism amounts to justification of the kind of violent outrage that has been seen in recent months, then it is irreconcilable with personal liberty, as I have characterised it.

I have not done much thus far to try and convince the reader that we ought to choose personal liberty over religions that entail religionism, and that has not been my intention. What I have tried to do is to demonstrate why personal liberty might be something that every human deserves (by virtue of its being universally desired), and thereby propose that we ought to be more epistemologically humble if the alternative is dogmatism, intolerance, and violent retribution.

I spoke about our ability to make moral value judgements without reference to an absolute moral order, through the exercise of those rational capacities roughly understood as efficiency and tolerance. In a society where technological advance is as rapid as it is today, we need to be tolerant of the notion that new, good ideas might come from anywhere. *The Innocence of Muslims* was not a clearly thought out, honourably motivated critique of a prevailing school of thought. It seems to have been a malicious attack that was borne out of ignorance and intolerance, and that was meant to cause offence. I believe that it should not have been made for these reasons. But where can we draw the line? According to my conception of personal liberty, people ought to be able to express disdain for a way of life that they disagree with, as long as this does not infringe upon the personal liberties of others. I believe that *The Innocence of Muslims* did not infringe upon the personal liberties of anybody. Just as Galileo did not infringe upon the personal liberties of anybody when he defended the Copernican heliocentric model of the universe. Just as Martin Luther King did not infringe upon the personal liberties of



anybody when he told us about his dream. These examples may seem inappropriate because they were inoffensive. Today we are happy to accept that the Earth orbits the Sun and that people should have equal rights, regardless of race. But at the time, they were highly contentious: Galileo was called before the Holy Office in April 1633, placed under house arrest and ordered to capitulate for his crime of heresy; 600 protestors against the denial of black voting rights were attacked by state and local police on 'Bloody Sunday' in 1965.

Society is an ever-changing entity. Our morals and expectations ought to be changeable along with it. If we accept that our knowledge is fallible, then we are susceptible to new ideas. Obviously not all new ideas will be good ones, but in order to remain open-minded to the ones that are, we need to be tolerant of the expression of the beliefs of others, as long as they do not infringe, or incite infringement, upon our personal liberties.

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