

# Innocence of Religion

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

The pathetically incompetent film [“Innocence of Muslims”](#) has sparked off the usual and predictable riots and murder around Muslim streets illustrates perfectly the cultural chasm between Islam and the West. It is not an issue of democracy, as is often suggested. After all, Hitler was elected democratically. It is the evidence of a culture that has simply never faced an “Enlightenment”. It has never had its Voltaire, or indeed its Spinoza. It blames everyone else for its own misfortunes. America and Israel are the sole agents of its own incompetence, and with its millions of uneducated unemployed the only way it can keep them occupied is by paying them to explode at others. It reminds me of the Crusades. Too many unemployed laborers causing havoc at home were shipped off to the Middle East to cause as much slaughter and mayhem as they could in someone else’s backyard. In those days, of course, the Muslims were more cultured than the Christians. Sadly, the roles have now been reversed.

It seems a Copt living in California was responsible, although I notice French news, still a week later, called it an Israeli film, and of course nothing will convince the yahoos that Jews were not to blame, because it seems most of the Muslim world believes Jews caused 9/11. One can sympathize with the way Copts in Egypt are being bullied, humiliated, and murdered; that’s par for the course. In many Muslim countries Christians are subjected to such constant barbaric assault it is hardly surprising that some of them want to retaliate.

Give a thought to the poor Mormons. [“The Book of Mormon”](#) is a hugely successful musical on Broadway that lampoons and laughs at them and their religion. But no Mormon has killed anyone over it or asked for a ban. On the other hand, Salman Rushdie, in his latest book, “Joseph Anton: A Memoir”, writes about how he was abandoned and disowned by much of the Western intelligentsia when the Muslim fanatics sought to kill him for writing “The Satanic Verses”. The culture of appeasement thrives. Politicians everywhere rush to apologize, to announce that it is only a small minority that is violent, and anyway it is our fault for provoking them with novels, cartoons, films, and other manifestations of that evil Western notion of “freedom of expression”.

In a similar vein, BBC Channel 4 decided to withdraw an excellent, respectful but academically rigorous documentary on Islam. [It dared to challenge the Muslim fundamentalist narrative and the presenter’s life was threatened.](#) So the BBC ends up censoring and supporting intellectual dishonesty and giving in to religious bullies.

At this time of the year when in our religion we are at our most intense level of spirituality I am bound to ask what’s wrong with some religions or religious people that take themselves too seriously? For hundreds, no thousands of years, Judaism has been criticized, vilified, and made fun of in

Christian and Muslim cultures. We put up with it. Sometimes we kicked back. But we haven't killed anyone in response. Though sometimes I wonder what our lunatic fringes who are often short on tolerance might have done had they not been forced to live under oppressive regimes for so long.

The fact is that Judaism, too, treats God and his prophets with respect. We go further than Islam in that we do not even use the "proper" name. Sometimes it is excessive, as with the dash in God's English name one often sees that takes it far further than was originally envisioned when only the Hebrew really mattered. It is one of the Ten Commandments not to take God's name in vain. And the Bible itself records how someone who cursed God in public was put to death. But over the years we have come to realize that actually it is human life that God wants us to respect. We have to respond violently only when we are threatened physically, in self-defense. But we are not to respond violently to perceived slights, even of our Deity.

Once upon a time we, too, reacted as if Divine wrath was constantly hanging over our heads. But most of us have matured. So it is with Yom Kipur. Once we might have associated the Days of Awe with Days of Fear. We were literally fearful. Would we live or would we die? Would we be punished with death for what we had done wrong religiously? Would we be smitten with thunderbolts when we did the wrong thing?

But nowadays we have other models. We can be religious because of its benefits and pleasures. I am religious because I enjoy it. I enjoy my conversations with God even though I often wonder if I am talking to myself. They are therapeutic and often help me clarify what I think God wants of me. I enjoy Shabbat and festivals for the different tempos and for the break from mundane, electronically determined life. I enjoy Rosh Hashanah with its sounds and Sukot with its physical symbols and closeness to nature. And in a strange way I enjoy Yom Kipur for the therapeutic self-analysis, and even for the recognition that one can actually survive for 24 hours without stuffing one's face all day long. There are, of course, disciplines as there are in keeping fit or eating healthily. But the disciplines also can produce benefits; they give long-term pleasure rather than short-term self-indulgence. Mine may not be the only way of responding to God, but it is one of them.

Overwhelmingly, God and religion are pleasures in my life and I only wish others could relax and enjoy them the way I do. And the world would be a far better place if religious fanatics, wherever they are, could really listen to the message of love that God, or whatever you call Him, keeps on reiterating. Enjoy the gifts of Heaven; don't focus on hate; focus on love. That's my message for Yom Kipur.