

## Free Speech Debate

Thirteen languages. Ten principles. One conversation.

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## Free speech as seen by a believer in an Abrahamic religion

Islam, Christianity and Judaism are often accused of wanting to restrict free speech. Dominic Burbidge suggests a radically different perspective, from inside the thought-system of the Abrahamic faiths.



Dramatic global clashes over free speech frequently pit a liberal-inspired defence of freedom

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against the sensitivities of religion. Whether it is in the [protests surrounding](#) the Innocence of Muslims YouTube video or the [reactions](#) to Jerry Springer: The Opera, religious adherents are framed as opponents to freedom of expression and proponents either of restrictive legislation or some kind of theocracy. It is very rare indeed that any analysis is made of what religions think of freedom of speech itself, or whether there is anything positive they can contribute to the debate. This article presents a view on free speech from the perspective of the Abrahamic religions of Islam, Christianity and Judaism.

For descendants of the faith of Abraham, the question of free speech starts not with demarcating what can or cannot be said, but instead by asking what it means to listen. The Tanakh, Bible and Qur'an are believed to be accounts of God's teaching, recorded by those inspired to hear, understand and recount their contents. The Prophet Muhammad, for example, is understood to have listened to the word of God as dictated by the Angel Gabriel. In turn, believers aim to develop their capacity for listening, as a way of grasping what has been revealed by God. Speech is not, therefore, normally framed in terms of a human right but in terms of a capacity of God. To take one example of many on how speech is considered a property of God, the Christian evangelist St John starts his gospel: "In the beginning was the Word: the Word was with God and the Word was God."

As can be seen in the very life of Abraham, the role of the believer is to come close to God's message and to develop one's capacity to hear, understand and apply it. Where this stance makes a clear break with the liberal or progressivist view is when the Abrahamic faiths see a living of one's faith to be a fundamental part of developing that ability to listen. As the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre observes in his book *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, this is a case of deepening one's understanding through living a tradition, whilst the liberal perspective situates itself between traditions.

Whether one is reciting from a siddur in a synagogue, kneeling in silence with Carthusian monks or pressing one's forehead to the ground at Mecca, there is a certain commitment to the idea that the sharpening of one's intellect and reason comes in approaching the perfection of God. In this way, the practising of an Abrahamic religion does not challenge the idea of reason or rational judgment; it challenges the liberal lifestyle, based as it is on choice, consumption and individualism. Those of Abrahamic faith doubt whether prioritising the satisfaction of material desires supports one's pursuit of the truth. In this way, the living of one's faith involves a commitment to the possibility that truth lies outside of one's appetites, and that these appetites must be mastered as part of attuning one's ears. By appealing to a higher version of ourselves we understand ourselves and our surroundings better.

Free speech arguments in Western Europe or North America often demand that persons subject their beliefs to rational discourse and debate. This is supported in Abrahamic religions but not through the separation of believer from belief that is characteristic of liberal individualism (and expressed in Free Speech Debate's [principle seven](#)). For someone of an Abrahamic faith, beliefs

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are subject to rational evaluation as coherent wholes, which are therefore refuted by an alternative system of thought that is able to display greater unity, coherence and breadth of application. Perhaps nowhere is this more apparent than in the writings of the Jewish scholar Jacob Neusner, who enters into deep and open dialogue with Christianity in his book, *A Rabbi Talks with Jesus*. After spending the day in an imagined discussion with Jesus, Neusner returns to a rabbi of another town, who asks him what Jesus said which was different to what can be found in the Babylonian Talmud:

Rabbi: "What did he [Jesus] leave out?"

Neusner: "Nothing."

Rabbi: "Then what did he add?"

Neusner: "Himself."

Rabbi: "Oh."

The argument here is that rational discourse between traditions comes not through attacking the other as irrational but through demonstrating greater coherence in one's own position. Indeed, although Neusner ends with a rejection of Jesus as the Messiah, the current Pope, Benedict XVI, found Neusner's account touching and stimulating. It is the same with Islam's appeal to Christianity: Muhammad is the last prophet, completing the accounts of his predecessors. An Abrahamic idea of free speech engages with traditions of thought systematically in order that persons arrive at the most consistent and harmonious account.

The fact that there are so many groups that have distinguished themselves within the Abrahamic tradition demonstrates how dynamic internal debates are. Such debates seek a more widely applicable and coherent system of moral thought at every stage and are therefore qualitatively distinct from the epistemological scepticism of René Descartes and David Hume that accompanied the Enlightenment and underpins the moral relativism we see in Western Europe and North America today. Whereas the liberal tradition sees the separation of belief from believer as a step forward, those of Abrahamic religions can only interpret it as an assault on their way of life.

For this same reason, it is always strange for those of Abrahamic faiths to hear the argument: "How can you say you do not like that book or film which ridicules your religion when you have not even read or watched it?" The person of faith is focused on his or her relationship with God and is taking care to develop listening powers that attune to God's goodness and the unity of truth. Overtly satirical or blasphemous material plays with one's understanding of God like a puppet on a string, mocking efforts to enter into a relationship with truth, without offering an alternative method of discovery. The only equivalent would be asking someone from the liberal tradition, "How can you say you are against the abuse of human rights when you have not even committed human

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rights abuses?” Just as the liberal does not believe he or she needs to watch child pornography to know it is morally wrong, so too does a person of Abrahamic faith not need to watch Muhammad performing obscene sexual acts to know Innocence of Muslims is morally wrong.

The liberal argument for free speech envisages a free exchange of ideas that exposes the irrationality in other systems of thought. What the person of Abrahamic faith resists is not this but the way in which the method of exposing irrationality solidifies a position of moral relativism through which traditions of thought are rejected en masse as forms of indoctrination, dismissing in turn people’s capacity to reason from within them.

The Abrahamic religions do not provide ready-made quotes or proverbs that can be inserted into a free speech argument to make it sound less liberal or western-centric. Nevertheless, understood on their own terms, they do provide a radical interpretation of the importance of speech by noting it as the primary way in which God reveals himself. Because persons of faith believe that God has spoken, they are called to develop and deepen their capacities for listening, an aspect of free speech which is often overlooked when concentrating on laws of what can or cannot be said. For any advocate of free speech it may be useful to see how focusing on a separation between the believer and the belief makes the liberal argument more, not less, difficult for persons of Abrahamic faiths, who see belief not as a property of the individual but as something pertaining to truth.

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