Freedom of speech means freedom to insult, to criticize and to apologize

By [James F. McGrath](#)
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Many of the recent discussions about "free speech" in connection with the internet video about Islam called "Innocense of Muslims," the violent reactions to it, and the apologies for it, seem to me to miss the point.

In our democracy, within limits to ensure that the safety of people is safeguarded, people can express themselves freely. That includes making movies, or art, or telling stories, or blogging, or doing anything else that someone of a particular religious viewpoint may find offensive.

If someone uses that freedom to express a hateful message, if someone else then apologizes to the victim of the hate-speech, and emphasizes that they themselves disagree with the other person and are sorry for what was said, that is not an apology for the existence of freedom of speech. Neither is it a curtailing of anyone's freedom of speech. It is a *use* of their freedom of speech to distance themselves from the message of the other person, equally freely expressed, and to express their sympathy with the person who was denigrated and insulted by that freedom of speech.

Am I missing something? Does this pretty much sum the matter up? Isn't the whole point with freedom of speech that you can insult someone and I can express my regret at the insult, and we both have our freedom to do so safeguarded?

Below is the video in question, which [Google has blocked in certain parts of the world](#). I think it is not merely offensive to Muslims, but to everyone, being of such [poor quality](#)that it is hard to take more offense at the content than at the fact that its makers wanted anyone at all to see it. I think that preventing people from making offensive videos is wrong. I think that making an outcry that goes beyond the use of free expression into violence and threats is wrong. And I think that there is nothing wrong with feeling very sorry after seeing a video like this – not just sorry for those

ridiculed and offended, but also sorry for one's own time wasted in watching it.

If you watch it, I think that you will agree that regret is the only possible response that is appropriate. And if you think I am insulting the movie, you're right – and thankfully, I live in a country where I am free to do so.

Here are some other posts and articles that relate to this topic.

Religion Dispatches tries to trace how events unfolded.

Jim West appreciates the freely-spoken sympathies expressed by Lybians. Jim also blogged about the aforementioned anti-Islamic film by Sam Becile.

Hilary Clinton spoke about not responding to insults with violence. CNN featured Stephen Prothero's thoughts on the subject.

Rebecca Cusey emphasized that we cannot allow the violent offense some take at free expressions to lead us to curtail those freedoms.

Danut Manastireanu discussed Christan and other fundamentalisms and their relation to violence. He shared some thoughts from Omid Safi. Danut also linked to an NPR piece on whether the Bible or the Qur'an is more violent. The history of Christian violence suggests that Christians ought not to throw stones – metaphorically or literally. The Coptic Church has condemned the film.

Nancy Shehata had harsh words for her fellow Muslims, and wonders that the protesters have nothing better to do. Nick Covington appreciated what she had to say.

David Henson responded directly to Mitt Romney.

Timothy Dalrymple discussed whether Sam Bacile is fictional. Tim Suttle says the video at the center of the discussion was produced by American Christians. Mills River Liberal also had an update on the identity of the anti-Muslim filmmakers

Michael Homan discusses various aspects of the issues. So does Scot McKnight.

Christian Piatt suggests that the video reflects a "fetish for Armageddon".

[Morgan Guyton reciprocated with a peaceful reply to the Libyans who offered condolences, sorrow, and regret.](#)

[Phil Fox Rose says the problem is neither religion nor extremism but hate.](#) [Larry Derfner suggests that at its core the issue is fanaticism](#).

[See also Richard Giannone's thoughts on religious freedom in the Huffington Post](#).

UPDATE: A couple more links that came to my attention after I posted this:

[Bob Cargill critically evaluates the Muslim Brotherhood's response](#).

[Ken Schenck looks at foreign policy proverbs](#).

Originally posted at [Exploring Our Matrix](#)