

Laura Basu, “Who Can Take a Joke?: *Life of Brian*, *Four Lions*, and Religious ‘Humour Scandals’,” *Relegere: Studies in Religion and Reception* 4, no. 2 (2014): 177–206.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial No Derivatives 3.0 License.

Relegere: Studies in Religion and Reception is an independent, open-access academic journal dedicated to the promotion and dissemination of innovative research in reception history, broadly conceived, within and across religious traditions.

www.relegere.org

ISSN 1179-7231

Laura Basu

Who Can Take a Joke?

Life of Brian, *Four Lions*, and Religious “Humour Scandals”

Why did Monty Python’s *Life of Brian* (1979) unleash a storm of protest and accusations of blasphemy on its release, what Giseline Kuipers calls a “humour scandal,” while Chris Morris’s satire about British Jihadi terrorists, *Four Lions* (2010), barely raised an eyebrow? A focus on a media representation of Muslims that did *not* cause an outcry—even though one was eagerly anticipated—and on one of Christianity that *did* offers a fresh perspective on the ongoing debate on blasphemy and free speech, Islamism and islamophobia. This article’s contention is that both films offer similar, liberal humanist messages and an inclusive brand of humour, and that their receptions complicate the idea of Muslim extremists versus the liberal west, showing us that such an imaginary is itself a religious one.

IN 2011, Monty Python’s Terry Jones revealed in an interview that he would not make a movie like *Life of Brian*¹ today, as it would be too risky in the current climate of religious resurgence and political correctness. Asked

Laura Basu is a postdoctoral researcher on the project *The Power of Satire: Cultural Boundaries Contested*, at Utrecht University.

¹ Terry Jones, dir., *Life of Brian* (Sony Pictures, DVD, 1979).

whether he would make a similar film about Muslims, he replied “probably not, looking at Salman Rushdie.”² The idea conveyed is that religious sentiment has become stronger and more repressive over the thirty years since *Life of Brian* was released, and especially when it comes to Islam. Only a year before the interview was published, though, a comparable film had been released, in the shape of Chris Morris’s *Four Lions*.³ While Monty Python’s satirical farce about Christianity unleashed a storm of protest and accusations of blasphemy on its release, what Giseline Kuipers calls a “humour scandal,”⁴ Chris Morris’s satirical farce about British Jihadi terrorists barely raised an eyebrow.

Jones claims that the Pythons never anticipated such a furore around their film: “At the time religion seemed to be on the back burner and it felt like kicking a dead donkey.”⁵ They were aware, however, that in the UK, moral stormtrooper Mary Whitehouse had just successfully resurrected ancient blasphemy laws to prosecute the magazine *Gay News* for publishing poems portraying Jesus Christ having gay sex.⁶ The editor even received a suspended prison sentence. They might have been less cognisant of the fact that, as they were busy finishing off the film, consulting lawyers and getting past the censors, Ayatollah Khomeini was ascending to power in Iran. It was Khomeini who, ten years later, issued the fatwa against Salman Rushdie for his novel *The Satanic Verses*. Khomeini is widely seen as an initiator of a global politicisation of Islam since the end of the cold war, which was responsible for the ruckus over the Prophet Mohammed cartoons in 2005 and the more recent violence over the YouTube clip *Innocence of Muslims*, not to mention an unending list of terrorist acts and a generalised “clash of civilisations.”⁷

The clash of civilisations is usually seen as a struggle between Muslims and western capitalism with its accompanying liberal democratic value system, which is tolerant and open and which fiercely protects freedom of ex-

² “Life of Brian would be too risky now, says Terry Jones,” *Guardian*, October 10, 2011, <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2011/oct/10/life-of-brian-terry-jones>.

³ Chris Morris, dir., *Four Lions* (Optimum, DVD, 2010).

⁴ Giseline Kuipers, “The Politics of Humour in the Public Sphere: Cartoons, Power and Modernity in the First Transnational Humour Scandal,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 14, no. 1 (2011): 63–80.

⁵ “Life of Brian would be too risky now.”

⁶ Robert Hewison, *Irreverence, Scurrility, Profanity, Vilification and Licentious Abuse: Monty Python the Case Against* (London: Methuen, 1981), 60.

⁷ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Touchstone, 1996).

pression. Religion in this context is supposed to be a private matter, and people are granted the “right to offend.” Western Christianity supposedly gave birth to and has taken on this mantle of liberal good humour, while Muslims still have a long way to go. Images of Muslims burning things in protest against their religion being mocked create a perception of a people frighteningly backwards and humourless.

If this is the case, why is it that no one burnt anything when *Four Lions* was released? And, on the contrary, why such a fuss over *Life of Brian*? In what follows, I will try to provide some possible answers to these questions, via a comparison of the two films’ treatments of religion and their receptions by religious groups, journalists and individuals. Focusing on a media representation of Muslims that did *not* cause an outcry—even though one was eagerly anticipated—and on one about Christianity that *did* can help approach the ongoing debate on blasphemy and free speech, Islamism and islamophobia from a fresh perspective. Since, as Talal Asad shows, Christianity, Islam, blasphemy and the secular are all contingent concepts which shift over time and space, effort will be made to contextualise the films and their receptions.⁸ Both films are comedies, and a discussion of the types and functions of humour will run through the article, using both Kuipers’s sociological and Simon Critchley’s philosophical approaches to humour, as well as conceptual tools from satire studies. As Kuipers has pointed out, it is crucial to understand that it is specifically *humorous* representations of religion that have caused the biggest outcries. Both are also well researched and intelligent treatments of religious themes. My thesis is that both films express similar, liberal humanist messages, by which I mean that they propagate both a universal (secular) humanism and the primacy of the individual. Despite being satires, they also offer a relatively inclusive brand of humour, given the societal divisions existing in the UK at their respective moments of production. Their receptions complicate the idea of Muslim fundamentalists versus the liberal west, showing us that such an imaginary is itself a religious one, one which conceals a multitude of sins.

Life of Brian

Life of Brian tells the story of Brian Cohen, a regular Jewish boy who was born at the same time and place as Jesus Christ and who gets mistaken for him with

⁸ Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

disastrous results. When Brian finds out his father might be a Roman soldier, he angrily joins a Jewish resistance group, gets in trouble with the Romans and, through a series of fateful events, ends up hanging on a cross, singing the now anthemic “Always Look on the Bright Side of Life.” As the Pythons have consistently pointed out, the film does not actually mock Jesus Christ himself, or any of his preachings as set out in the Gospels. In fact, when Jesus does appear, he is played straight, and baby Jesus is even portrayed with a halo of light around him. *Life of Brian*’s laughter is directed towards the blind following of leaders and doctrines, and its disastrous consequences. In Eric Idle’s words, “it became clear early on that we couldn’t make fun of the Christ since what he says is very fine (and Buddhist), but the people around him were hilarious, and still are!”⁹ As I will show, the film is not an attack on the Bible but rather offers a thoughtful historical and philosophical reflection. It does, though, ultimately deliver an alternative set of values, and an essentially liberal humanist message.

An obvious difference between the two films analysed here is that *Life of Brian* is set in first Century Judea, while *Four Lions* is set in modern day Britain. Much of *Life of Brian*’s humour derives from bringing together disparate times and places, and the accompanying juxtaposition of the mundane and colloquial with the grand or divine. Calling the main character Brian is itself a way of bringing together a strikingly unglamorous modern Britain with the exotic time and place of Jesus Christ. The frequent interjection of slang and especially profanity into the biblical setting also produces this effect. For example, in one scene, Brian desperately tries to convince a mob of followers that he is not the messiah:

BRIAN: Will you please listen? I’m not the Messiah! Do you understand? Honestly!

WOMAN: Only the true Messiah denies his divinity!

BRIAN: What? Well, what sort of chance does that give me? All right, I *am* the Messiah!

CROWD: He is! He is the Messiah!

BRIAN: Now, *fuck off!*

[Silence]

ARTHUR: How shall we fuck off, oh Lord?

⁹ David Morgan, *Monty Python Speaks* (London: Ted Smart, 1999), 174.

Juxtaposition is one of the key techniques of comedy and especially satire. It is a clever tool, which in this case enables the film to direct its satire in a number of different directions, and—crucially—ultimately to paint a universalist picture of human absurdity. Firstly, as was Monty Python's *raison d'être*, it allows the film to poke fun at the staid, British establishment of the Pythons' time and place. In one famous scene, Brian is committing an act of vandalism against the Romans, scrawling "Romans go home" in Latin on the palace wall. A Roman centurion, played by John Cleese, discovers Brian; instead of instantly hauling him away to prison, he corrects his Latin and makes him write the line a hundred times until the entire building is covered with anti-Roman graffiti. Cleese's centurion is a distinctively English disciplinarian public school teacher, punishing the naughty school boy for not doing his homework. Britain's deeply entrenched class system and its stuffy establishment figures thereby become objects of fun.

The sword cuts both ways, however, and the time and place of what is considered to be the birth of Christianity are themselves brought back down to earth from their lofty heights using this same technique. Roman centurions are nothing more than public school teachers in funny costumes. The effect is strengthened by the fact that the Pythons all carried out extensive historical research while making the film. Indeed, Philip Davies writes that *Life of Brian* "not only reflects a higher level of historical and biblical research than nearly all exemplars of the Hollywood genre which count among its targets, but also engages with a number of basic scholarly historical and theological issues."¹⁰ As the quote makes clear, *Life of Brian* is a parody of Hollywood Jesus films such as *King of Kings* (1961). (Parody mocks aesthetic convention where satire mocks social convention, though the two often exist side by side.) What it ridicules in these films is their outlandish sobriety and reverence. In doing so it reminds us that people, no matter who they are or when they lived, may always provoke laughter. *Life of Brian* is full of oddballs, who are at home in any time or space: from the centurion-teacher, to the ex-leper cured by Jesus the "bloody do-gooder," to the right-wing prisoner who loves the Romans for bringing law and order to the country, not to mention Brian's mother Mandy or Pontius Pilate. Most of all, it is the various crowds—listening to sermons, attending stonings and public pardons,

¹⁰ Philip R. Davies, "Life of Brian Research," in *Biblical Studies/Cultural Studies: The Third Sheffield Colloquium*, ed. Stephen D. Moore and J. Cheryl Exum (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 400.

and chasing Brian—which exemplify the wonderful absurdity of the human condition.

One of the most controversial scenes, and one which demonstrates the historical research involved in making the film, depicts Brian's crucifixion. After failing to escape or be rescued or pardoned, he is strung up with a number of other criminals, who together end the film singing "Always Look on the Bright Side of Life." At a couple of points throughout the story, crucifixion is made light of by other characters. When threatened with crucifixion, one resistance fighter replies "could be worse ... at least it gets you out in the open air," and later, "crucifixion's a doddle." When Brian is captured and incarcerated, the right-wing prisoner accuses him of being the jailor's pet: "oh, you'll probably get away with a crucifixion." Those who objected to the film claimed that it mocks the suffering Jesus Christ endured for our sins. The Pythons meanwhile explain that crucifixion was in fact a routine—though horrific—punishment meted out by the Romans at that time, and it is likely that Jesus would have had company on the cross. Through Brian, Jesus is thereby humanised, and some of the mysticism is taken out of his life story.

As the previous paragraph has probably made apparent, while Brian is not to be conflated with Jesus, in a way *he is Jesus*: a possible, human, historical Jesus, who did die on a cross, but among a rag-bag of other victims of the Romans. In this sense, the protesters were not wrong (I will return to both films' receptions later on). Philip Davies correctly observes that the film splits the figure of Jesus in two, separates the divine Jesus from the historical Jesus, and explores the historical aspect through the character of Brian. Both Philip Davies and James G. Crossley have shown how the Pythons incorporated some of the most up-to-date theories on the historical Jesus into their film. One of these was that Jesus was a revolutionary who fought against the Romans. This was most famously argued by S. G. F. Brandon, who claimed in the 1960s that the gospel traditions were edited after a failed Jewish revolt against Rome, and the nationalistic overtones of a revolutionary Jesus were erased from history. Brian explicitly becomes a resistance fighter, and his revolutionary antics are the drivers of the narrative. Perhaps the most ridiculed entities in the film are the various revolutionary factions who are indistinguishable but who despise each other more than they do the Romans. In one scene, Brian's resistance organisation, the People's Front of Judea, hatches a plan to kidnap Pilate's wife and mutilate or kill her if demands to dismantle the "entire apparatus of the Roman Imperialist State" are not met. At the scene of the crime they bump into rival resistance group, Campaign for Free

Galilee, who have the same plan. They begin squabbling about who came up with the idea first. As the fight becomes physical Brian tries to interject:

BRIAN: Brothers, we should be struggling together!

FRANCIS: (*between gritted teeth*) We are.

BRIAN: Brothers! We mustn't fight with each other. Surely we should be united against the common enemy.

ALL: (*both revolutionary groups in horrified unison*) The Judean People's Front?????

BRIAN: No no, the Romans.

This treatment of revolutionary groups pointedly refers to leftist organisations operating in the UK in the 1960s and 70s: trade union, socialist, feminist and anti-imperialist movements, who were known for their petty internal politics and in-fighting. Some of the film's sharpest ridicule is reserved for these groups. At the same time, the Pythons would have discovered during their research that such dynamics were also to be found historically, among the Jewish groups resisting Roman occupation. The major historical source for this episode in history—one which the Pythons would have read, according to Davies—is *The Jewish War* by Flavius Josephus, written toward the end of the first century CE. Josephus (admittedly with his own, Flavian, bias) explicitly blames the war on the disharmony within the Jewish resistance groups, describing decidedly python-esque scenes of internal conflict:

There were now three treacherous factions in the city, each one separated from the others. Eleazar and his group, who were keeping the first-fruits festival, attacked John in a state of drunkenness. John's followers plundered the populace and zealously went after Simon ... as if deliberately to do the Romans' work for them.¹¹

Thus, what is on one level an absurd placing of modern leftist groups into a comically distant past, is on another level making a connection between that time and place and our own. This de-mystifies the milieu of Jesus and the beginnings of Christianity and tells us that such outrageously self-destructive silly behaviour is part of a human condition which unites us across time and space.

¹¹ Josephus, *Jewish War*, 5.1.4, cited in Davies, "Life of Brian Research," 402.

Above all, the film laughs at the foolish following of leaders and doctrines, and offers a liberal, secular message. Brian is first mistaken as the messiah because, while trying to escape from the Romans, he spots a row of people preaching all kinds of nonsense, and pretends to be one of them. At first the crowd is sceptical but once the Romans are out of sight, he runs off mid-sentence, and the crowd starts thinking he must possess some secret about the right path in life, and assumes he is the saviour. They chase him and continually hound him for a sign or a blessing. They misinterpret everything as a sign or a miracle, which inevitably leads to fighting and accusations of heresy. Brian desperately tries to convince them that he is not the saviour, and that they do not need a saviour, and in that sense he does become a kind of preacher. What he preaches is a message of individualism. Perhaps the most well-known scene is one in which a mob of devotees has gathered outside Brian's window, wanting to see the messiah. His infuriated mother appears, saying "He's not the messiah, he's a very naughty boy!" Brian eventually does address the crowd, explaining to them,

BRIAN: Look. You've got it all wrong. You don't need to follow me. You don't need to follow anybody! You've got to think for yourselves. You're all individuals!

CROWD: (*in perfect unison*): Yes, we're all individuals.

BRIAN: You're all different!

CROWD: Yes, we are all different!

HOMOGENOUS MAN: I'm not.

CROWD: [Multiple silencing sounds]

BRIAN: You've all got to work it out for yourselves!

CROWD: Yes, we've got to work it out for ourselves!

BRIAN: Exactly!

CROWD: Tell us more!

BRIAN: No! That's the point! Don't let anyone tell you what to do!

Brian is thus a kind of historical, human(ist), secular Jesus, who is moreover also weak and silly, and is not much different from the crowd and the other ridiculous types populating the film. In contrast, the "real" Jesus is shown to be far removed from the realities of humanity. As he is preaching, the camera pans backwards a great distance, revealing the listeners below who cannot properly hear his message of peace, and begin squabbling amongst

themselves. The message is that humans are irredeemably flawed and stupid, and that that is what makes us so funny and so great.

The iconic ending of the film, with Brian and the other prisoners strung up on crosses singing “Always Look on the Bright Side of Life,” makes explicit where *Life of Brian* stands on the idea of both the resurrection and life after death. The lyrics state, “You come from nothing, you go back to nothing. What have you lost? Nothing!” The treatment of the crucifixion is what Wiersma describes as its essential ironic breach: “On the one hand, you have the audience’s understanding that the cross is a serious matter, an instrument of cruel justice ... and the central symbol of the central event of the Christian narrative. On the other hand, you have *Brian’s* narrative: the cross is a doddle ... That’s irony.”¹² It is this central irony, importantly a *comedic strategy*, that for Weirisma renders *Life of Brian* a semi-serious, nihilistic, challenge to Christianity and its narratives of eternal life, and is what provoked much of the outrage from Christian organisations. John Morreall goes so far as to ask whether religiosity, and specifically Christianity, and humour are compatible at all, and presents many arguments from religious thinkers over the centuries which answer in the negative. Firstly, for Morreall, the whole concept of the sacred puts many religions potentially in conflict with humour, since there is always a chance that something held sacred will be treated light-heartedly and may be found sacrilegious. Secondly, comedy from the days of Aristophanes has been full of “drunkards, lechers, liars, adulterers and others with major vices.”¹³ For certain Christian groups such as the Puritans, it was and is inappropriate to laugh at such vices. Thirdly, according to Morreall, the overall consensus over the centuries has been that, in “Western monotheistic religions,” God has no sense of humour: “In the Bible, God laughs only in scorn at his enemies, never in amusement, and each mention of God’s laughter at his enemies is followed by his slaughtering them. Furthermore, there seems to be nothing funny associated with this laughter.”¹⁴

However, while Morreall’s article is an insightful study of the treatment of humour in religious and philosophical texts, it does not consider the different articulations of different religions and their relations to humour within

¹² Hans H. Wiersma, “Redeeming *Life of Brian*: How Monty Python (Ironically) Proclaims Christ *Sub Contrario*,” *World & World* 32, no. 2 (2012), Kindle Version, “The Use of Irony.”

¹³ John Morreall, “Humour, Religion and Philosophy,” in *The Primer of Humour Research*, ed. Victor Raskin (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008), Kindle version, “Issues.”

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

their social contexts, especially in terms of the *power* dimensions of humour (discussed in more detail later on). There are more and less dominant religious groups within societies, and humour is used by and against them for different political ends. One of the reasons I am writing this article is to address the prevailing claim that Christianity *is* now compatible with humour, while Islam is not. Rather than discussing religion and humour in general, then, it is perhaps more useful here to consider specific articulations of religions in their contexts, and to speak about different types of humour instead of humour *per se*. While funny and ironic, the crucifixion scene is not a moment of *ridicule* or *mockery*, but rather an offer, albeit a cheerfully morbid one, of an alternative set of values. The scene which perhaps comes closest to actually mocking a basic Christian tenet was not picked up on by the protesters. It is the surrealist interlude in which Brian is saved from death by an animated UFO, and witnesses a galactic battle between aliens. It was foremost an homage from Terry Gilliam to the recently released *Star Wars*, but can also be interpreted as making fun of the idea of supernatural deities, suggesting that a belief in God or angels is little different from a belief in ET.

Part of both the demystification of the past and the liberal message comes in the treatment of female sexuality. These days it is usually Islam which is associated with gender inequality, but *Life of Brian* shows that Christianity in several of its forms over the centuries has entailed its fair share of gender repression. One thing that protesters against the film, especially in the US, most strongly objected to was the fact that Brian's mother (interpreted as the mother Mary) was played by a man, Terry Jones, and, for that matter, in pantomime dame style. The Pythons loved to dress up in women's clothing, and this can be seen as part of the Monty Python comic tradition. It also bends what had become rigid gender roles within the framework of Christian morality in Britain in the mid twentieth century. Brian's mother, Mandy, makes it clear that she is very far from being a virgin, when she explains that Brian's father was not in fact a Jew but a Roman soldier. When asked if she was raped she replies "well, at first ... yes." This also recalls a theory, posited at least as far back as the second century CE, that the story of the miraculous virgin birth was fabricated to conceal the dark truth that the real father was not even the saintly Joseph but a Roman soldier by the name of Panthera.¹⁵

¹⁵ Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 1.32, cited in James G. Crossley, "Life of Brian or Life of Jesus? Uses of Critical Biblical Scholarship and Non-Orthodox Views of Jesus in Monty Python's Life of Brian," *Relegere: Studies in Religion and Reception* 1, no. 1 (2011), 102.

Again, although Mandy is not Mary, it is impossible not to connect them, and this treatment of the son of God's mother helps to demystify the story of Jesus. The topic even gets broached by one of Brian's deluded followers:

YOUTH: Excuse me.

MANDY: Yes?

YOUTH: Are you a virgin?

MANDY: I beg your pardon.

YOUTH: Well, if it's not a personal question, are you a virgin?

MANDY: "If it's not a personal question"! How much more personal can you get? Now piss off.

YOUTH: She is.

CROWD: Yeah. Definitely.

This rather English exchange on the subject of politeness and reserve begs the question of why Jesus's mother's sexual history is quite so important in the first place. Brian himself also has sex, in a rejection by the film of Church of England taboos around sexuality in general.

Hopefully this exegesis of *Life of Brian* shows how it thoughtfully explores a number of Christian themes. Its humour is directed at the mindless following of arbitrary doctrines, but even more so at the absurdity of human beings in general. In this sense, it is a gentle, indulgent mockery, which includes the makers of the film themselves among its targets. In this, it rejects the conventional Christian moral framework of good and evil, sin and redemption, instead revelling in a humanity which is resourceful, opportunistic, good humoured, irreverent, helpful and silly, and neither has a chance of salvation nor requires it.¹⁶ Any attempt at maintaining authority or a hierarchy is rejected, from the school-teacher centurion to Pontius Pilate, who, along with his friend Biggus Dickus, is lambasted by the crowd for his speech impediment.

In its gentle light-heartedness, the film brings to mind the first of Northrop Frye's three categories of satire from 1957, which, if afforded a measure of flexibility, still offers a useful way in to looking at how satirical humour works. The first category is genial satire, or "satire of the low norm,"¹⁷ gently mocking the avoidable follies of everyday human conduct. Thomas Jemielity

¹⁶ Davies, "Life of Brain Research," 409.

¹⁷ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 226.

describes this as “non-revolutionary satire.”¹⁸ It does not call for the displacement of the satirised society, but rather looks for ways of living within its limits. Horace and Jane Austen have been described as fitting this model.¹⁹ *Saturday Night Live* might be also said to belong to this category. *Life of Brian* fits neatly into this group, with its all-encompassing soft mockery.

It would be correct to say that satire is by definition divisive to some degree. M. D. Fletcher defines satire as “verbal aggression in which some aspect of historical reality is exposed to ridicule.”²⁰ George Test argues that all satire contains four elements, which distinguish it from other forms of aesthetic expression: aggression, judgement, play and laughter.²¹ There can be no aggression or judgement without a target, and no target without division. Indeed, one of the three main theories of humour as a whole is superiority theory, where the laugher is laughing *at* somebody else, positing a position of superiority (the other two main theories of humour are relief theory and incongruity theory). We could furthermore say that, since the secular as well as the religious is a constantly moving category, and that the secular defines itself precisely against the religious,²² the very positing of *Life of Brian* as a secular humanist film reveals some level of division. However, Frye’s first-phase satire can be seen as the least harsh and thereby the least divisive form of satire. In fact, as far as *Life of Brian* is concerned, one could be forgiven for discounting it as a satire at all, so little judgement and especially aggression is there to be found.

We might even accuse *Life of Brian* of being too forgiving, of not going far enough with its satire, not only in terms of the Church, but also in its treatment of colonialism. Michael Palin explains that the Pythons found easy parallels between the Roman occupation of first century Judea and a British colonialism that was gasping its last breaths at the time the film was made.²³ Portraying Roman imperialists as forgivable fools lets the history of British imperialism off too lightly. So too does the scene in which a member of the People’s Front rhetorically asks what the Romans have ever given them,

¹⁸ Thomas Jemielity, “Ancient Biblical Satire,” in *A Companion to Satire*, ed. Robert Quintero (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 24.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ M. D. Fletcher, *Contemporary Political Satire: Narrative Strategies in the Post-modern Context* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1987), ix.

²¹ George Test, *Satire: Spirit and Art* (Tampa: University of South Florida Press, 1991),

14.

²² Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular*.

²³ Morgan, *Monty Python Speaks*, 175.

apart from “the sanitation, the medicine, education, wine, public order, irrigation, roads, a fresh water system, and public health.” As Davies writes, “The British ... and especially the public-school class from which Monty Python comes, are content to poke gentle fun at [imperialism’s] administrators, without condemning the system itself.”²⁴ This is a missed opportunity, not only to challenge British imperialism, but to make a connection between Christianity itself and imperialism; an imperialism that helped create the Jihadi terrorists who are the subject of *Four Lions*.

Four Lions

Four Lions is a black comedy following four young British Muslim would-be terrorists, as they plot and completely bungle an attack on the London marathon. It, too, is at heart a liberal humanist film, showing a familiar side to the Jihadists and laughing at the idiotic mistakes made on both sides of the “war on terror.” The film’s maker Chris Morris is himself known as somewhat of a “TV terrorist,” satirically treating topics which most would shy away from, including disease, suicide and paedophilia, and excoriating the media and political establishments. *Four Lions* was his debut feature film, and journalists eagerly awaited a storm of outrage which never arrived. Again, I will return to both films’ receptions later. Many have made comparisons between Chris Morris and Monty Python, in terms of their surrealism and sense of the absurd, and *Four Lions* was even referred to in one newspaper comments section as “the Muslim *Life of Brian*.”

Morris and Monty Python are not actually in general very similar: Morris’s work is usually darker, angrier and more politically engaged. The two films, though, have much in common, despite obvious differences in setting, the religion treated and plot—although both involve bungled terrorist activities as the driving force behind the narrative. The most important similarities, though, are the thoughtfulness with which they approach their political-religious themes, and their sense of humanist universalism. Like the Pythons, Morris also conducted extensive research into his subject matter, reading expert reports, going to trials, and meeting FBI agents, imams, and hundreds of Muslims across the UK.

Morris says his inspiration came from reading about real life attempts at terrorist acts, which involved a high degree of absurdity: in interviews he

²⁴ Davies, “Life of Brian Research,” 411.

describes the case of aspiring Yemeni terrorists who planned to attack a US warship by ramming it with an exploding boat. They gathered in the middle of the night and filled the boat with explosives. It sank. “At training camps young jihadis shoot each other’s feet off, chase snakes and get thrown out for smoking. A minute into his martyrdom video a would-be bomber asks the cameraman, ‘What was the question again?’”²⁵ At a trial in the UK, surveillance footage of the young men in the dock revealed them chatting about how great Johnny Depp is and how cool he would look with a big beard. Farce is notable all the way up the terrorist chain: apparently, alleged 9/11 plotter Khalid Sheikh Mohammed spent two hours looking for a costume that wouldn’t make him look fat on camera.

Morris had an epiphany: a terrorist cell is just “a bunch of blokes planning cosmic war from a bedsit.” It is this human aspect that comes through most strongly in *Four Lions*. Although the stupidity of most of the Jihadi characters is caricatured (Faisal thinks he can conceal his identity by covering his beard with his hands, and blows up a crow while trying to use it to deliver explosives; Waj needs jihad explained to him by reference to Alton Towers theme park), they are recognisable Yorkshire lads, complete with Hovis accents. They banter with each other about Mortal Combat and Maroon Five, and dance around to Toploader. Like *Life of Brian*, *Four Lions* also creates humour from juxtaposing the mundane with the sacred, though in a less exaggerated way. Talk of holy war and heaven is set against a decidedly drab backdrop of grey terraced houses and rusty cars which keep breaking down.

The familiarity of the main characters stems from their being completely “western” and British, not weird Muslim medievalists. The film deals in an extremely intelligent way with the questions of identity which have become fraught over the past decades, problematising every stereotype we have of Muslims and Muslim terrorists (the clue is in the title). An immense but largely unperceived contradiction frames everything the boys do and say: they despise everything the west stands for to the point of declaring holy war upon it, yet they are superlatively western. This paradox is illustrated most clearly during the many rants against western imperialist materialism given by the leader, Omar, which are unintentionally undermined by other members of the group, who show that “western” culture is their own. The following dialogue, from the filming of their Jihad videos, is an example.

²⁵ Brian D. Johnson, “Martyr Video Bloopers and Other Jihad Hijinks,” *Macleans* 124, no. 10 (2011), <http://www.macleans.ca/culture/martyr-video-bloopers-and-other-jihad-hijinks>.

OMAR: Today is an opportunity for you to look in the mirror at your western imperialist culture, superficial materialism, which ends at the capitalist church of MacDonald's. It's as though you just had a Big Mac, completely oblivious to the amount ...

WAJ: Complete flippin' idiots. You could've gone Chicken Cottage. Proper halal, bargain bucket, £6.99.

OMAR: What are you talking about?

WAJ: I'm talking about Chicken Cottage.

One member of the group, Barry, the provocateur, is a white British convert, inspired by a real life neo-Nazi-turned-Jihadi that Morris read about. He is the angriest and least sympathetic of the group, coming across as a frustrated opportunist, craving recognition. He appears on panel debates denouncing the west, and recruits a new member to the terrorist team, Hassan, from the local college. Two of the other members are mentally slow, followers who are at heart sweet boys who just need to belong to something. The least bumbling of the four is Omar, who arranges a trip for himself and his closest friend Waj to a Pakistani training camp, from which they get evicted for accidentally launching a rocket in the wrong direction. (At the end of the film we discover that the missile blew up Osama bin Laden.) He has a loving wife and young son, and convinces himself that he is a soldier of good. The scene in which this comes across most strongly is when he explains himself to his son using the story of the *Lion King*, falteringly casting himself as Simba. Interestingly, this too was taken from reality, as Morris found that the *Lion King* is a hit among Jihadists: "You think 'this is ridiculous.' And then you think, 'But of course it's telling a good-vs-evil narrative.'"²⁶

Where Omar's desire for Jihad comes from is unclear, and this is perhaps a flaw in the film. Luckily, it refuses a simplistic causal link between Islamophobia and radicalisation, though it is clear that the boys feel alienated by white British society. One of the strongest scenes shows Hassan interrupting the panel discussion featuring Barry with a Jihadi rap ("I'm the Mujahideen and I'm making a scene / Now you's gonna feel what the boom-boom means / It's like Tupac said, 'When I die, I'm not dead' / We are the martyrs, you're just smashed tomatoes / Allahu Akbar!") followed by a hoax bomb explosion. As everybody panics he scorns "oh, what, just cos I'm Muslim you thought it

²⁶ "Four Lions: Al-Qaida in clown suits," NPR, November 1, 2010, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=130982825>.

was real?” This both caricatures and underscores the pervasive Islamophobia to which Muslims in Europe feel subjected. The rap simultaneously depicts a thoroughly western, Tupac-loving, radical Muslim. Such multiplicity of identity is also seen in the fact that most of the boys can speak some Urdu, especially Omar, who, along with his uncle, produces some impressive Urdu cursing (at one point, an angry Omar refers to the rest of the group as “useless, fuck my auntie from a standing position, pyjama wearing cockerel dick” in Urdu); they also frequently refer to themselves as “pakis.” The complexity of identity and the internal struggles this can lead to when subjectivities are instrumentalised for exclusionary and violent ends by both the state and other political or religious organisations are thus thematised.

Crucially, Omar and his wife Sophia have a loving and, notably, equal relationship, and she is fully supportive of his plans. A key contrast with Omar, his family, and his crew, comes in the form of his brother Ahmed. Ahmed is deeply religious, focusing on scripture, his mosque and Qur’an study group, and always shown wearing a kufi and kurta. He will not be in the room with Sophia, who mocks him for “keeping his wife in a cupboard.” Both Omar and Sophia tease Ahmed for his old fashioned piety. As viewers, we are at a loss as to whether to laugh with them or not, since while Ahmed’s lifestyle does seem ridiculous, the laughers—who are most similar to ourselves—are waging a holy war. Omar and Ahmed bicker incessantly about Ahmed’s sanctimony, but also about Omar’s blood lust. Ahmed suspects Omar’s violent plans and repeatedly tries to persuade him to stop. The most hard-line Muslim is thus completely peaceful, while the terrorist embraces a liberal western identity, including its supposedly informal, equal gender relations.

The film is extremely funny, but it is also sad and moving at times. The boys do all end up dying, and their deaths are both hilarious and tragic. After arguing for much of the film over which target they should bomb (candidates include a mosque, Boots chemist, and “the internet”), they finally agree on the London marathon. Dressed as a ninja turtle, the honey monster, an ostrich and an upside down clown, with explosives strapped on underneath their costumes, they journey through London. Faisal has already accidentally blown himself up by dropping a shopping bag full of explosives while jumping over a hedge in a field. Hassan and Waj are noticeably traumatised by the event, which they witnessed. When Omar visits the hospital where Sophia works as, of all things, as a nurse (Omar’s job is to monitor security videos) to tell her in code that he is about to martyr himself, she slowly nods her head, the enormity of her approaching loss dawning on her. At the last minute,

Hassan finally admits to himself that he is in way over his head, and, panic-stricken, reveals their plan to police who are there to patrol the marathon. Barry promptly detonates Hassan's device, the remaining three start to run, and a police chase begins. In the end, the mentally slow Waj hijacks a kebab shop run by Turkish Muslims. Waj has been confused throughout, and Omar frequently guides him by telling him that he should listen to his heart, since Allah is in his heart. Right before the planned attack, though, Waj has doubts and Omar, instead of telling him to listen to his heart, which is now saying it is wrong to blow himself up, betrays him by convincing him that his heart is not really his heart, and that he should go ahead with the attack. Filled with regret, Omar frantically tries to reach him. Meanwhile, the police negotiator and the kebab shop owner are desperately trying to dissuade Waj from setting off his explosives. In the end, all attempts fail, Waj explodes, and Omar, devastated, walks into the nearest Boots and blows himself up. While all the deaths are farcical, they are also truly upsetting, as the boys' humanity, their feelings of fear and love, strongly come through.

Stupidity is by no means exhibited by the Muslim boys alone. As with *Life of Brian*, the world of *Four Lions* is populated almost entirely by oddballs. Agents on the other side of the war on terror are portrayed as being equally incompetent, and the film can be seen as just as much a send-up of the authorities as of wannabe terrorists. In one hilarious scene, police snipers are trying to shoot the boys down, but keep getting confused by the different costumes worn by the marathon runners and get into an argument about the difference between a wookie, a grizzly bear, and the honey monster. When they realise they have shot a civilian and not the target, one officer exclaims "It must be the target, I just shot it." Later on during the aftermath we catch a televised interview with an MP, who explains, "The report makes crystal clear that the police shot the right man, but, as far as I'm aware, the wrong man exploded. Is that clear?"

Throughout the film, there are hints that the boys are under surveillance by the police authorities. One of the most chilling moments comes towards the end, when we realise that it is not the Jihadis but Omar's brother, the pious but peaceful Ahmed, that has been under surveillance, and British intelligence has got the wrong Muslim. A massive armed squad raids Ahmed's house. Scarier still, the very end scene shows Ahmed being held in an army base outside of British legal jurisdiction, and threatened with torture by a British intelligence agent. Here, incompetence becomes something which can have terrifying as well as tragic consequences.

These aspects of the film are crucially important. Firstly, stupidity is shown to be something universal, not limited to specific ethnic, religious or social groups. Secondly, the army base scene, along with the scenes at the Pakistani Jihadi training camp, situates the relatively trifling events and characters of the film within a far wider, global context, in which both sides are engulfed. The film's harshest attacks are directed not at the Jihadi boys but the power structures which help create and use the individuals on both sides of the "war on terror." In this sense, it is a more politically committed film than *Life of Brian*, and a darker one. It comes closer to Frye's second phase of satire, the "quixotic phase," in which societal conventions and structures are challenged directly, or, in some ways, even third phase satire, the Swiftian "satire of the high norm," which undermines even that which we think is common sense, turning our whole world upside down. This type of satire puts us in highly uncomfortable, often abject positions, bringing us down to a "bodily democracy paralleling the democracy of death in the *danse macabre*."²⁷ The dances of death carried out by the boys, as well as the exposing and attacking of the global political structures governing their behaviour, allow this film to accomplish the remarkable feat of combining harsh critique with a level of humane inclusivity.

Reception: the Salman Rushdie Effect

Much has been written about the reception of *Life of Brian*.²⁸ In brief, having passed the censors after extended consultation with lawyers, it was first released in the US, where ultra-orthodox Jewish groups followed by numerous Christian organisations and individuals protested against it all over the country, and successfully prevented it from being shown in certain areas. The Citizens against Blasphemy Committee was formed to bring a prosecution against the film, which ultimately failed. Its release in the UK followed a similar pattern. Mary Whitehouse's Nationwide Festival of Light, the organisation which only two years previously had managed to revive ancient English blasphemy laws to prosecute the publishers of *Gay News* magazine, and which had lobbied the British Board of Film Censors to refuse a certificate to *Life of Brian*, did not try to bring criminal charges of blasphemy, as the clear distinction between Brian and Jesus would have almost certainly meant the case would fail. It did, however, campaign against the film along

²⁷ Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, 235.

²⁸ See Hewison, *Irreverence*, for a detailed account.

with other Christian groups, its protests leading to thirty-seven local authorities preventing cinemas from showing the film. Other cinemas made the same decision of their own volition. The Archbishop of York and the Bishops of Durham, Bath and Wells, Chichester, Birmingham, Chester, Derby, and Worcester all publicly protested against the film. The furore was immortalised in a televised debate on *Friday Night, Saturday Morning*, between the Bishop of Southwark, Mervyn Stockwood, and Malcolm Muggeridge (himself a former satirist) on one side, and John Cleese and Michael Palin on the other. While the Pythons had come prepared for a serious debate, Stockwood and Muggeridge had missed the beginning of the film and proceeded to sling insults for the duration of the piece. Stockwood's parting shot was that the Pythons would get their thirty pieces of silver.

The opposition to the film was thus organised primarily by religious associations which mobilised journalists and individuals to join campaigns across the country. The establishment in the UK at the time was conservative and Church of England and was fringed by more extremist groups such as The Nationwide Festival of Light, which had arisen in opposition to what they saw as the "permissive society," beginning in the 1960s. The reception of *Life of Brian* must therefore be seen in the context of wider social struggles between the established powers and those who wished them to be stricter on one hand (and it is these entities that the film mocks more than any religious teachings) and those in favour of a more liberal, progressive or "permissive" society on the other. The film was not distributed at all in Ireland, Norway or Italy. The Pythons all received death threats.

At this point it is helpful to discuss briefly the blasphemy laws in England and Wales (they are not the same in Scotland or Northern Ireland), since, in Plate's words, "blasphemy is a contested, fluid, and dynamic category of meaning."²⁹ Blasphemy was declared a common law offence in the seventeenth century, and was only abolished in 2008. At the *Gay News* trial, the judge said blasphemous libel was committed if a publication about God, Christ, the Christian religion or the Bible used words which were scurrilous, abusive or offensive, which vilified Christianity or might lead to a breach of the peace. In an 1838 case, the law had been restricted to the protection of the "tenets and beliefs of the Church of England." The last person to be sent to prison for blasphemy was John William Gott. In 1922, he was sentenced to nine months' hard labour for comparing Jesus to a circus clown. In Scot-

²⁹ S. Brent Plate, *Blasphemy: Art that Offends* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2006), 27.

land, there has not been a public prosecution for blasphemy since 1843. In 2008, the blasphemy laws were abolished in an amendment to the Criminal Justice and Immigration Bill. The Racial and Religious Hatred Act was enacted in 2006, this time encompassing all religions.

Outrage from “the Muslim community” was widely anticipated by the UK and US press prior to the release of *Four Lions*. Journalists wrote things like: “You don’t have to be Salman Rushdie to know that mixing satire and Islam can be a perilous business”;³⁰ “Conventional wisdom might suggest that some subjects are just off limits [for comedy and satire] ... Islamic terrorism would seem to be at the top of that list”;³¹ and “Muslims will say that Morris has committed numerous sins against their faith.”³² The project experienced problems with funding due to its subject matter, and at one point even resorted to asking the public for donations in return for roles in the film as extras. However, on its release there was very little fuss. In fact, those who worked on the film report a very favourable reception from British Muslims. Reviews were on the whole positive, and no official organisation attempted to take any action against it. What calls for a ban there were came from a small number of (non-Muslim) families of the victims of the 7/7 bomb attacks in London. These, though, did not cause much of a storm, despite attempts to whip one up by right-wing tabloid the *Daily Mail*. The *Daily Mail* was the media outlet which gave the film the worst reviews, though these in no way attacked *Four Lions* for offending Islam, but rather for being in bad taste and even for not going *far enough* in its critique of religion.³³ Interestingly, almost all the comments made by the public following the online articles *defended* the film, even comments after articles about the “fury” of the 7/7 families—preying on feelings of collective trauma, fear and anger.³⁴ Nowhere in the mainstream press are Muslim voices recorded that are against the film. On Muslim forums the majority of comments are in support. There are occa-

³⁰ Johnson, “Martyr Video Bloopers.”

³¹ Michel Martin, “A Comedy about Terrorists?” *NPR*, 12 November 2010, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=131267950>.

³² Nick Fraser, “Four Lions: How Satirist Chris Morris Fixed his Eye on Ideology and Bombers,” *Guardian*, January 24, 2010, <http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2010/jan/24/chris-morris-four-lions>.

³³ Christopher Tookey, “Lions are not a Roaring Success,” *Mail Online*, May 6, 2010, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/reviews/article-1274097/Four-Lions-Its-roaring-success>.

³⁴ Lizzie Smith, “Fury of 7/7 Relatives at Suicide Bomber Comedy Four Lions,” *Mail Online*, May 6, 2010, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-1273955/Fury-7-7-relatives-suicide-bomber-comedy-Four-Lions>.

sional mild mannered exchanges about whether it makes fun of Muslims, as in the following:

HAFSAH: Has anyone seen 'four lions' yet? What did you think? ... Personally I found it funny ... and think Muslims will def find it funnier than non-muslims, I didn't find it particularly offensive, but I'm not 100% sure what they are trying to achieve from this film ...

AURORASCOPIC: My husband wanted to go watch this so we watched the trailer on youtube and I said no straight away. I think it's just taking the pi\$\$ out of muslims. That is the point of it ... as far as I can see. as it is I just hate the fact that muslims/islam is associated with all things terrorism and murder etc and this movie just concentrates on that and is just basically taking the pi\$\$ so it's a no for me...

YAQOOT MARJAAN: Having watched four lions, it was in no way taking the mick of Islam, it was just genuinely funny...

HAFSAH: i wouldnt say its aim is to take the p out of muslims ... some parts were slightly unnerving ... kinda like 'do i laugh or is this really wrong' ... but i really dont think anyone would get offended...

Thus, despite Muslims now having the right to bring Blasphemy charges in the UK, and despite the heightened atmosphere there of Islamophobia since the 9/11 attacks and before, the reception of the film from Muslims and non-Muslims alike was largely positive, and criticism was mild.

Both the Salman Rushdie affair and the Danish cartoons depicting the Prophet Mohammed are very much present in the above news items anticipating *Four Lions*. They also feature heavily in the present-day coverage of *Life of Brian*, of which there is a surprising quantity, related mostly to anniversaries, new productions from Python members, new productions about the Pythons and the film, and so on. As mentioned in the introduction, Terry Jones cited the Rushdie affair as a reason why he would not dare to make a film like *Life of Brian* about Muslims. Tony Roche wrote a television

drama about the “mother of all hoo-hahs,” the row over *Life of Brian*, which aired in October 2011. In newspaper articles he discusses the “timeliness” of the film, in light of the Danish cartoons controversy.³⁵

Rushdie has been in the news again recently, partly due to the publication of his memoirs, and partly in reference to the violent reaction to the eleven minute YouTube clip of *Innocence of Muslims* in Egypt, Yemen, Libya, Tunisia, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. In Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* (1988), the character of the Prophet (an avatar of the Prophet Mohammed) is referred to as Mahound, a derogatory term used by the English for the Prophet during the crusades; the Prophet is depicted as a “debauched sensualist,” his esteemed companions are referred to by other characters as “the trinity of scum,” “that bunch of riff raff,” and “fucking clowns,” and prostitutes in a brothel are given the names of the Prophet Mohammed’s wives.³⁶ For these reasons, offence was taken by many Muslims, who considered the book blasphemous. There was an attempt to prosecute under the blasphemy laws in England, which failed because the law only protected the Church of England. There were protests, some of them violent, all over the world. The book was banned in countries all over Asia and Africa. In February 1989, the dying Ayatollah Khomeini issued a fatwah—a death sentence—on Rushdie and his publishers. From then on, Rushdie was under constant police protection, while violence spread all over the globe. In Turkey there was a massacre of thirty-seven people. Publishers and translators have been stabbed and shot.

The Rushdie affair can retrospectively be seen as the first global “humour scandal” centring on Muslims. Giseline Kuipers writes that “humour scandals—public controversies around transgressive humour—are recurring events in media democracies, playing out social divides through a dramatization of moral and political rifts.”³⁷ Although *The Satanic Verses* is not comedic *per se*, those who were offended perceived it as *ridiculing* and *mocking* their religion, implying humour and laughter.³⁸ Since Rushdie we have seen other Muslim humour scandals, most notably over the competition for the best

³⁵ Tony Roche, “The Life of Brian: When Monty Python took on God,” *Telegraph*, October 19, 2011, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/tvandradio/8833320/The-Life-of-Brian-When-Monty-Python-took-on-God.html>.

³⁶ Akhtar cited in Richard Webster, *A Brief History of Blasphemy: Liberalism, Censorship and The Satanic Verses* (Southwold: The Orwell Press), 29.

³⁷ Kuipers, “The Politics of Humour,” 64.

³⁸ See Umar E. Azam, “Rushdie’s ‘Satanic Verses’: an Islamic Response,” http://www.dr-umar-azam.com/islamic_response/islamic_response_intro.htm; Ahmad Deedat, “The Satanic Verses Unexpurgated,” <http://www.themodernreligion.com/assault/srushdie.htm>.

Prophet Mohammed cartoon launched by Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* in 2005 and 2008, and the recent case of the *Innocence of Muslims* clip. The Muslim humour scandals in turn incite strong reactions from non-Muslim commentators, leading to a western perception of Muslims as humourless, old fashioned, and violently fanatical. A “clash of civilisations” is constructed between these supposedly medieval Muslims and the progressive, secular liberal west, which prizes freedom of expression.

If this binary arrangement is really the case, how do we explain the predominantly Christian humour scandal surrounding *Life of Brian*, which precisely expresses secular humanist values? The first and most obvious point is that we should not ignore the Christian fanaticism which is very much alive and kicking in the “west,” especially in the United States. As *Life of Brian* was being finished in 1979, not only was Khomeini coming to power in Iran, but the Moral Majority was establishing itself in the USA, destined to have great impact on that region’s politics for decades to come.

The story is much more complicated than one about lingering Christian extremism. Scholars such as Huntington and William D. Rubinstein claim that religious fundamentalism has surged across the globe in the wake of the end of the cold war and the demise of political ideologies. The one exception to this rule is Western Europe. However, this narrative of western European freedom from religious zeal is too simplistic, as Richard Webster shows in his compelling *A Brief History of Blasphemy*, which was written to address the Rushdie affair and the religious climate in the UK. Firstly, Webster explains that the “west”—including England and the rest of Western Europe—is not nearly as secular as it likes to think, but that its historic Christian repression has been internalised to the point where it would not even occur to most cultural producers to create a work which blasphemes against Christianity.

In any ordinary social relationship it would be considered an unpardonable breach of good taste for a sceptic or a non-believer to engage in obscene blasphemies against Jesus or against the Christian faith in the presence of a devout Christian. So profoundly do we seem to have internalised the sacredness of the Christian religion that such blasphemies would probably be considered distasteful even if they were uttered only in the company of fellow sceptics or unbelievers.³⁹

³⁹ Webster, *Brief History of Blasphemy*, 25.

Attempts at public blasphemies against Christianity are in practice very rare.

Secondly, on the occasions when such blasphemies are attempted, the limits of free speech are soon discovered. Webster cites the case of *Gay News*, where the publisher was actually given a suspended prison sentence for publishing poems depicting Jesus having homosexual sex. As Saba Mahmood points out, The European Court of Human Rights upheld two state bans on films deemed offensive to Christian sensibilities in the 1990s.⁴⁰ Webster gives other, startling examples. We are reminded that *Satanic Verses* is not the only Penguin book to be burnt, and the Danish cartoons are not the only ones to be censored. In 1967, Allen Lane, former Editor at Penguin Books, burnt an entire print-run of Sine's *Massacre*, which contained anti-clerical and blasphemous cartoons. In 1976, Danish film-maker Jens Jorgen Thorsen tried to make a film about the sex-life of Jesus in Britain. The project was met with intense opposition, not only from pressure groups but from the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Queen and the Prime Minister. The film was not made. These are examples not of legal censorship but of organisational or individual internalised censorship. *Life of Brian* also fell victim to this, as briefly discussed by Webster. Even though in its original form *Life of Brian* was an extremely mild satire, and not really blasphemous, it only gained a certificate for general release after certain cuts had been made. Indeed, it was nearly never made, since EMI retracted its funding after learning more about the subject matter. Filming was delayed and only took place at all because George Harrison stepped in with the funds. Moreover, it was shunned by the BBC and ITV, neither of whom would show the film for fear of offending British Christians. "Once again a blasphemy was restrained—or its circulation effectively curtailed—not by the force of law but by the internalisation of this law."⁴¹

What we tend to forget during Muslim humour scandals is that the "freedom" implied in the term "liberal" is highly circumscribed. The novel as a literary form enjoys a relatively high degree of autonomy, but every newspaper, every film, everything we watch on television, and everything we see on billboards has undergone a strict vetting process. This is not to mention the legal strictures around intellectual property. Most people in liberal democratic countries would by no means support full freedom of expression.

⁴⁰ Saba Mahmood, "Religious Reason and Secular Affect: an Incommensurable Divide?" in *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech*, Talal Asad et al., ed., (Berkeley: The Townsend Center for the Humanities, 2009).

⁴¹ Webster, *Brief History of Blasphemy*, 27.

As Talal Asad argues, the law in liberal democratic societies does not simply function to protect or prohibit free speech but the actually establishes what qualifies as free speech in the first place.⁴² In the rare instances when the boundaries of this legal framework are breached, all hell breaks loose.

This would go some way to explaining the reception of *Life of Brian*. How, though, to explain the *lack* of scandal around *Four Lions*, especially in light of the high profile Muslim humour scandals of recent years? The simple divide between the liberal west and the over-religious Muslims is as complicated by the absence of controversy around *Four Lions* as it is by the outrage around *Life of Brian*. An obvious point is that *Four Lions* does not have anything to do with the Prophet Mohammed, whereas the Muslim humour scandals all revolve around depictions of the Prophet. Any representation of the Prophet is disapproved of by some Muslim teachings. *The Satanic Verses*, the most controversial *Jyllands-Posten* cartoons and the Innocence of Muslims moreover all contain pointedly derogatory portrayals, which gets us closer to the point.

The issue of depicting the Prophet Mohammed seems to be tied to a modern western Islamophobia which may itself be related to the history of western Christianity. Why is it that the issue of freedom of expression has come to hang on the right to attack Islam by (negatively) depicting and ridiculing the Prophet? That seems a very odd issue over which to mount a great struggle, given the limitations to our freedom of speech we encounter every day. It would appear that the right we are really insisting upon is the right to express freely our Islamophobia without any risk of resistance or retaliation. In Judith Butler's words, "Under what conditions does freedom of speech become freedom to hate?"⁴³ In this case, there is little wonder that Muslims all over the world take offense at media texts which are intended precisely to mock and insult them. To return to Morreall's question discussed above about whether religion and humour are fundamentally incompatible, we can see here again how context is key—it is not a question of inherent incompatibility but that both humour in the form of ridicule and accusations of being humourless are used by dominant groups to undermine further religious groups which are—in the contexts of Europe and the US—oppressed.

⁴² Talal Asad, "Free Speech, Blasphemy, and Secular Criticism," in Asad et al., *Is Critique Secular?*

⁴³ Judith Butler, "The Sensibility of Critique: Response to Asad and Mahmood," in Asad et al., *Is Critique Secular?* 127.

A crucial connection that Webster makes is between secular liberalism and its Christian history, reminding us that the terms “secular” and “liberal” are highly unstable and have mutually constitutive relationships with religious forms.⁴⁴ He describes what he calls “Liberalism’s holy war,” the ferociousness with which western commentators on Muslim humour scandals defend (an imaginary) freedom of speech, and with which they decry the backwardness of Muslims. He cites Fay Weldon in *Sacred Cows* (“The Koran is food for no-thought. It is not a poem on which society can be safely or sensibly based. It gives weapons and strength to the thought police.... You can build a decent society around the Bible ... but the Koran? No.”) and Conor Cruise O’Brien in *The Times* (“Muslim society looks profoundly repulsive.... It looks repulsive because it is repulsive.... At the heart of the matter is the Muslim family, an abominable institution.... Muslim society is sick, and has been sick for a long time.”)⁴⁵ Martin Amis wrote in 2006, “There is a definite urge to say, ‘The Muslim community will have to suffer until it gets its house in order’” and condoned “Not letting them travel. Deportation further down the road. Curtailing of freedoms. Strip searching people who look like they’re from the Middle East or from Pakistan. Discriminatory stuff, until it hurts the whole community and they start getting tough with their children.”⁴⁶ Liberal values have become a religion over which many are fanatical. Interestingly, *Life of Brian* envisioned its own liberal message as a religious one, preached by Brian. Both Norman Mailer and Rushdie himself have described their art of writing literature in religious terms, as a “frail religion” which is “the absolute we must defend.”⁴⁷ Doctrines of tolerance are in this context decidedly intolerant.

This is hardly surprising, since western liberalism arose out of a Christianity which was itself intolerant and divisive, regularly using blasphemy and ridicule against its enemies. Those enemies were Muslim and, most often, Jewish. The legacy of the Crusades was an intensified demonization of Muslims in general and the Prophet Mohammed in particular. It was anti-Jewish sentiment, however, which became one of the most decisive forces in European history from the eighteenth to the mid twentieth century. Edward

⁴⁴ See also Wendy Brown, “Introduction,” in Asad et al., *Is Critique Secular?; Talal Asad, Formations of the Secular*.

⁴⁵ Webster, *Brief History of Blasphemy*, 43.

⁴⁶ Rachel Donadio, “Amis and Islam,” *The New York Times*, March 9, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/09/books/review/Donadio-t.html>.

⁴⁷ Webster, *Brief History of Blasphemy*, 56.

Said and Karen Armstrong have both theorised that our era's increased Islamophobia comes from a displacement of a deeply anti-Semitic tradition which can no longer find expression after the discovery of the horrors of the Holocaust. Armstrong writes that the "hatred we used to allow ourselves to feel about the Jews has been transferred *in toto* to the 'Arab.'" This phenomenon becomes even more dangerous now that Arabs are seen as the enemy of the Jews, and the new anti-Semites: "Much of our new prejudice is a transfer of unmanageable guilt. The Arab is being made to carry a double load of hatred in Europe: besides bearing the traditional Western hatred of the 'Muslim', he is now having to take on our load of guilt for our ... anti-Semitism."⁴⁸ Thus, the Western liberal aggressively negative perception of Muslims as too-religious itself stems from a Christian anti-Islamic and anti-Semitic tradition. Interestingly enough, *Life of Brian*'s emphasis on Brian/Jesus as a Jew would have been relatively new and bold. Prior to the 1970s, critical scholarship as well as popular understandings of Jesus sharply differentiated Jesus from Judaism, due to a latent anti-Semitism.⁴⁹

The conditions for modern capitalism and its accompanying liberal doctrines were created out of developments in European Christianity. In the early twentieth century, Max Weber showed that Calvinism, and in particular English Puritanism, played a role of preponderant importance in creating moral and political conditions favourable to the growth of capitalist enterprise. This involved immense struggles to reject the external authorities of the church and place religious authority within the conscience of the individual, or "the Christ within." Protestantism was what Fredric Jameson calls a "vanishing mediator," a necessary bridge between feudalism and capitalism—with its attending liberal democratic ideology—which, once it had fulfilled its function, became less visible.⁵⁰

What I hope to have shown is that both the western desire to offend Muslims and offence taken by Muslims are part of a set of power relations which extends far through both time and space. Although Rubinstein's account of increasing religious extremism is overly simplistic, he does show how political Islamic organisations have developed out of anti-imperialist nationalist movements which had communist alliances during the cold war in Afghanistan, Algeria, Palestine, and elsewhere. Ironically, it is British groups

⁴⁸ Ibid., 38.

⁴⁹ See Crossley, "Life of Brian," 109–12.

⁵⁰ Fredric Jameson, "The Vanishing Mediator: Narrative Structure in Max Weber," *New German Critique* 1 (1973): 52–89.

in solidarity with these Marxist movements that *Life of Brian* sends up. As we know, European colonial projects were carried out both in the name of Christianity and with the help of secular Enlightenment ideologies of progress which developed out of it. The progression of secularism thus cannot be detached from a history of structurally embedded violence. Asad asks why it is that violence in the name of democracy or the state is tolerated while violence in the name of religion is met with horror. Resistance to western imperialism—still ongoing—has acquired an increasingly religious form. Indeed, Plate notes that the strict Wahhabism that prohibits representation of the Prophet gained momentum at the same time that the Middle East was being reorganised by European colonisers.⁵¹ Both this mutation of what is essentially a political struggle and the western coverage of it no doubt obscure the core issue which is the capture and control by force by a few people of all the resources humans require in order to survive.

Indeed, Mark Curtis gives a highly convincing account of the continual covert support successive UK and US governments have given to Islamist movements since the Second World War in order to protect their economic interests and power positions, most often against popular secular nationalist movements, especially in Egypt and across the Middle East.⁵² This is to say nothing of their alliances with extremist regimes in Saudi Arabia and Pakistan.

Where to locate *Four Lions* and its lack of accompanying outrage in all of this? The answer lies in the fact that, unlike the Danish cartoon competition, *The Satanic Verses* and the *Innocence of Muslims*, *Four Lions* is not an expression of Islamophobia. Rather, as I hope I have shown above, it meticulously complicates all western Islamophobic stereotypes, displaying a level of complexity derived from the extensive research Morris carried out, including meeting and talking with hundreds of Muslims. As a result, the humour of the film is inclusive of British Muslims rather than divisive. As mentioned, its harshest attacks are reserved for overarching global power structures on both sides of the “war on terror,” and not for the ordinary human beings who idiotically perpetuate them on the micro level, as we all do.

This brings us back to the discussion of humour, and particularly the *power* dimensions of humour and satire, the direction of the humour, and

⁵¹ Plate, *Blasphemy*, 138.

⁵² Mark Curtis, *Secret Affairs: Britain's Collusion with Radical Islam* (London: Serpent's Tail, 2010).

the social position of both target and audience. Kuipers's point about the political nature of humour is important here. Humour is often divisive: creating a community of laughers who, through their laughter, exclude the laughed at. This is the superiority theory of humour again. Humour is thus a mechanism through which to exert power, and for that reason often serves as a social corrective. It is difficult for those who are the object of humour to find an elegant response, since humour is a slippery signifier, whose intention can easily be denied. One can choose simply to accept being the butt of jokes; one can get angry; or one can joke back. The first brings feelings of low self-esteem and amounts to the acceptance of subjection. The second—represented by humour scandals—can bring accusations of having no sense of humour, which can lead to further ridicule and provocation. Since this anger is now a transnational phenomenon, it can cause violence completely disproportionate to its trigger. The third—the best response—requires a level of confidence that it is difficult for ridiculed and excluded groups to display. The Danish cartoons and the *Innocence of Muslims* are all exemplars of this divisive kind of humour, in that they judge, ridicule and attack already oppressed minorities, at least within the countries where they were made, for whom it is not easy to bring a dignified response, and mobilise *on the side of an established order of domination*. Jonathan Gray et al claim that this type of top-down ridicule fails to fall into the category of satire at all, which they see as necessarily critiquing power structures, though previous scholars on satire such as Robert Elliot include the humour of oppression—such as that mobilised under National Socialism—in their discussions of satire.⁵³

Kuipers calls for a more inclusive type of humour, which she sees represented by the recent emergence of Muslim comedians all over the western world. This kind of humour “is inclusive: an invitation to laugh together, rather than a jibe aimed at silencing others.”⁵⁴ Morreall gets close to this when he problematizes the superiority theory of humour. He claims that when we laugh at a shortcoming in another person, this does not necessarily imply a sense of superiority; we may rather be acknowledging that we have the same shortcomings: “what we are really laughing at is *our shared short-*

⁵³ Jonathan Gray, Jeffrey P. Jones, and Ethan Thompson, “The State of Satire, the Satire of the State,” in *Satire TV: Politics and Comedy in the Post-Network Era*, ed. Jonathan Gray, Jeffrey P. Jones, and Ethan Thompson, (New York: New York University Press, 2008); Robert Elliot, *The Power of Satire: Magic, Ritual, Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960).

⁵⁴ Kuipers, “Politics of Humour,” 78.

comings.”⁵⁵ *Four Lions* can be seen precisely in this light. As extrapolated above, its humour is directed not at Muslims but at what is human. This laughter approaches what Simon Critchley calls “the highest laugh”:

the laugh that laughs at the laugh, that laughs at that which is unhappy... Yet, this smile does not bring unhappiness, but rather elevation and liberation, the lucidity of consolation. This is why, melancholy animals that we are, human beings are also the most cheerful. We smile and find ourselves ridiculous. Our wretchedness is our greatness.⁵⁶

This is the inclusive laugh directed at the absurd condition of humanity. Both *Four Lions* and *Life of Brian* attempt to provide this, the “highest laugh.”

Conclusion

Why did *Life of Brian* fail to be effectively inclusive in its humour where *Four Lions* succeeded? Perhaps the Pythons’ collective persona as “the fool” ultimately worked against them. The fool conventionally possesses a freedom to ridicule those in power that others do not. Monty Python had a long established reputation for playing the fool. Their absurd irreverence had riled a number of people in authority and in the mainstream of British society. The fool always carries the risk that his humour may be ill-received and is exposed to potential danger in those instances. Ironically, Chris Morris has not been seen as a harmless fool. Those who know his work may find it surprising that I describe *Four Lions* as inclusive; most of his work is itself filled with outrage and is a far cry from gentle humanistic mockery. It is political in the sense that it marks a division: an “us” and a “them.” However, the “us” tends to be ordinary people, while the “them” is the powerful institutions and figures of authority that make “us” their dupes and their pawns. “We” are also mocked for our stupidity in falling for “their” schemes. In this sense, his usual humour is not so different from *Four Lions*, though more savage. In the film, ordinary British people, Muslims and non-Muslims are the “we,” the fools who perpetuate the “war on terror” which is not waged for our benefit. The reception of *Four Lions* shows that, while fanatics and fanatical organisations of all religions can find anything to fight about, most of “us” can take a joke.

⁵⁵ Morreall, “Humour, Religion and Philosophy.”

⁵⁶ Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (London: Routledge, 2002), Kindle version, Chapter 7.