Is Religious Conviction Special?

Kimberley Brownlee[1]

ABSTRACT: Religious moral convictions are not special when it comes to their 1) cultural trappings, 2) epistemic pedigree, or 3) epistemic status within the communities that hold them. Although many religious moral convictions differ from many non-religious moral convictions in all three respects, neither type of conviction differs categorically from the other in any one of these respects.

A Story (Spoiler Alert)

In Ian McEwan's novel *The Children Act,* High Court Family Law Judge Fiona Maye must rule on whether to order a life-saving blood transfusion for Adam, a 17 year-old boy with leukaemia, who is a member of Jehovah's Witnesses. After visiting Adam in hospital, hearing his poetry, and singing with him, Fiona does order the transfusion on the grounds that his best interests are not served by letting him refuse treatment.

McEwan graphically describes the effect of Fiona's decision on Adam and his family, who'd been counselled by community elders to remain firm in their beliefs. When the transfusion is performed Adam vomits across his hospital bed. Later, in a letter to Fiona, he describes not only his sense of violation, but also his shock when his parents came into his hospital room in joyful tears. His parents were joyful because they'd stayed true to their beliefs and would not be shunned by their community, but nonetheless got to keep their son. Adam is repulsed by his parents' joy. He leaves his family, having lost a secure sense of meaning. He seeks out Fiona for guidance and orientation, which she cannot give him. The climax of the story follows.[2]

Another Story (Spoiler Alert Again)

---

[1] This paper is forthcoming in *Religion in Liberal Political Philosophy*. Cecile Laborde and Aurelia Bardon (eds.), OUP, 2017. If possible, please cite that version. I offer this paper with an apology for its overgeneralizations about religious belief and its unsubstantiated empirical claims about both religious and non-religious beliefs. I thank Aurelia Bardon, Cecile Laborde, Fay Niker and Thomas Parr for very helpful feedback on this paper. I thank Fay and Tom for valuable research assistance.

[2] McEwan, Ian (2014), *The Children Act*. Jonathan Cape.

In Henry James's short story *Owen Wingrave*, the son of an influential military family, who is receiving elite military training, decides that he must reject war as a crime. He is shunned, persecuted, and disinherited by his family for this decision. He then takes a grave risk to prove that he's not a coward, and pays with his life.[3]

Introduction

Religious moral convictions such as Adam's family's belief that accepting a blood transfusion violates God's law are not epistemically or morally special. They do not warrant a distinctive analysis or form of accommodation from non-religious moral convictions such as Owen's belief that war is a crime or his family's belief that military glory is supremely valuable. Both religious and non-religious moral convictions are worthy of toleration and accommodation where possible, when they meet certain conditions.

I shall defend this claim, first, in relation to the cultural trappings that come with many convictions (Section 2). As Adam's and Owen's stories illustrate, these trappings can include community membership, personal identity, subjective integrity, and comprehensive meaning as well as the risks of excommunication, loss of standing, shunning, shame, and guilt. Collectively, these trappings can make it very beneficial to someone to hold true to his (community's) convictions and very costly for him to deviate from them. But, as Owen's case shows, these trappings are not unique to religious convictions. Many non-religious convictions are both deeply held and community-embedded.

Moreover, cultural trappings are also not universal amongst religious convictions: not all religious convictions are either deeply held or community-embedded. (A person might abandon her Church but continue to live by many of its moral commitments.)

When cultural trappings are present, they give us a defeasible reason to tolerate, or even accommodate, the convictions they surround if possible, regardless of whether the convictions are religious.

Next, I shall defend my claim in relation to the epistemic pedigree of convictions (Section 3). I argue that the majority of both our religious moral

[3] James, Henry (1892), *Owen Wingrave*. Various editions. Accessed from: http://www.henryjames.org.uk/owenw/home.htm

convictions and our non-religious moral convictions rely on authority and, hence, to that extent, they do not differ in their epistemic pedigree.

Finally, I shall defend my claim in relation to the epistemic status of convictions within the communities that hold them (Section 4). Many core religious convictions are viewed by their holders not only as true, but also as secure against revision on the basis of counterevidence or logical refutation. By contrast, most non-religious convictions are (presumably) viewed by their holders as true but vulnerable to revision on the basis of counterevidence or logical refutation. However, neither claim is universally true for either type of conviction.

I shall not discuss the *content* of convictions since I've argued elsewhere that there is nothing inherently special about the content of religious convictions.[4] Or, rather, I've argued that there is nothing inherently special in the way that people relate to the content of their religious convictions. Both religious convictions and non-religious convictions can pass (or fail) a four-part test for intelligibility and sincerity, which I have called the *communicative principle of conscientiousness*. Briefly, the four parts of the test are: 1) consistency between belief and conduct; 2) universal moral judgment; 3) non-evasion; and 4) dialogic effort. When convictions pass this test we have reasons to be tolerant and accommodating of them where possible.[5]

Before proceeding, let me briefly pin down the notions of *conviction*, *moral conviction*, and *religious conviction* that I shall use in this discussion.

1. Convictions

This paper is not about Belief as such. Instead, it is about moral convictions, i.e. our convictions about what we morally ought to do and believe, which can include a moral conviction that we ought to have Belief including specifically a belief in God.

The English word 'conviction' comes from the Latin verb *convincere*, which means to convict, to convince, to prove, to conquer, or to demonstrate. *Conviction* is the mental state or condition of being convinced, of having a strong, settled belief or

[4] Martha Nussbaum explores the idea that the subject matter of religion, that is, ultimate questions about life, death, meaning, and life's ethical foundations, distinguishes it from other kinds of beliefs and convictions. She says that, while it would be too dogmatic to say that the search for ultimate meaning has intrinsic value, it is appropriate to say that the human faculty that makes such a search possible is of intrinsic value. See Nussbaum, Martha (2008), *Liberty of Conscience*. New York: Basic Books, 168ff.
[5] See Brownlee, Kimberley (2012), *Conscience and Conviction: The Case for Civil Disobedience*, chs 1 and 5.

commitment founded on minimally satisfactory grounds.[6] A conviction need not be correct, but it must meet *minimal* standards of intelligibility, internal coherence, and evidential satisfactoriness. Otherwise it has no determinate content, and hence it gives us no way to specify what consistency would require or what accommodation would involve.[7]

A *moral conviction* is a conviction that contains some moral judgement. In other writing, I have argued that a *conscientiously* held moral conviction is a sincere and serious, but possibly mistaken, moral commitment that the holder is willing both to articulate to others and to bear the costs for holding.[8] In this discussion, I shall put aside the non-evasive and dialogic features of *conscientious* moral conviction, and employ a more minimal notion such as that adopted by Matthew Pianalto who conceives of a (moral) *conviction* as a resilient central belief that is strongly motivating.[9]

When it comes to *religious convictions*, we might think that any belief that a person holds with sufficient depth and sincerity borders on a religious conviction. Consider the following exchange in James's *Owen Wingrave* between Owen's military tutor Mr Coyle and Owen's fellow pupil Lechmere:

> "[Owen] doesn't want to go anywhere. He gives up the army altogether. He objects," said Mr Coyle, in a tone that made young Lechmere almost hold his breath, "to the military profession."
> "Why, it has been the profession of all his family!"
> "Their profession? It has been their religion!"[10]

In such cases, the term 'religion' is used metaphorically to highlight a degree of commitment that we usually associate with religious belief.

For the purposes of this discussion, we should conceive of *religion* in technical terms as a recognised system of spiritual belief and practice. This technical notion is narrow enough to exclude non-systematic, fly-by-night spiritual views, but broad enough to accommodate systems of spiritual belief, such as Buddhism, that are not premised on acknowledging a anthropomorphised superhuman power. *Religious moral*

---

[6] Oxford English Dictionary (current online edition, May 2011). See Brownlee (2012), ch 1 for an analysis of *conviction*.
[7] Brownlee (2012), ch. 1.
[8] Brownlee (2012), ch 1.
[9] Pianalto, Matthew (2011), 'Moral Conviction', *The Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 28: 4, 381-95.
[10] James (1892).

convictions, then, are resilient central beliefs about moral issues that are strongly motivating and relate to the recognised system of belief and practice. The kinds of convictions that fall within *religious moral conviction* thus conceived include everything from the Christian Ten Commandments, the five central Buddhist ethical precepts, and the Jehovah Witnesses' belief that accepting a blood transfusion violates God's law, to beliefs about the number of required daily prayers, appropriate attire in public, and proper relations between men and women.[11]

Admittedly, the technical notion of *religion* used here is broad and, consequently, potentially contentious. Some readers might object to it on the grounds that it does not require theism; they might argue that a system of spiritual belief, such as Buddhism, is not in fact a religion since it does not include a belief in a god. And, it is only by not requiring theism, that I can hope to show that there is nothing special about *religious moral convictions* in terms of their cultural trappings, epistemic pedigree, and epistemic standing in the communities that hold them.[12]

In reply, first, one reason to adopt a broad notion of *religious moral conviction* is so as not to presume to judge, except at the most general level, what is and is not religious. Second, since I am not discussing the content of convictions as such, it is irrelevant for present purposes whether that content includes theism or not. Third, even if we adopted a narrower, theistic notion of *religion*, my arguments would hold, as I shall demonstrate in the discussion below.

Identifying what falls outside *religious moral conviction* is difficult not because some communities like Owen's family imbue beliefs in military glory with the status that others give to religion. Rather, it's difficult because, in some religious communities, religiosity pervades most, if not all, aspects of members' lives down to their political affiliation, attitudes to reproduction, attitudes to leisure and recreation, investment decisions, family arrangements, clothing, lifestyle choices, and indeed attitudes to war. This kind of pervasive influence is exerted not only over nuns, monks, ministers, and spiritual leaders, who define their lives by their religion, but also

---

[11] In most religious traditions, there are clear moral duties and rules. In Christianity, there are the Ten Commandments; in Buddhism, there are the Five Habits for Happiness (i.e. five traditional precepts or guidelines for integrity). Underlying each habit is the intention not to cause suffering to others (or ourselves). The Five Habits of Happiness are: 1) Refrain from killing; 2) Refrain from stealing; 3) Refrain from inappropriate sexual relations; 4) Refrain from unskillful speech; 5) Refrain from using intoxicants that cause heedlessness. Framed positively, they are: 1) Honour all life; 2) Share your time and resources; only take what is freely given; 3) Take care with sexual energy, respecting boundaries and offering safety; 4) Speak kindly; 5) Develop a healthy mind and body.

[12] I thank Aurelia Bardon for highlighting this point.

sometimes over the lay community. For instance, it's not unusual in the United States for preachers to tell their congregations that God asks them to vote for a particular political candidate. In times of war, it's not unusual for spiritual leaders to say that God is on their side.[13]

As this implies, there may be no type of moral conviction whose content is, by nature, non-religious, except perhaps the convictions that we morally ought not to have a system of spiritual belief, ought not to believe in God, or ought not to promulgate beliefs in God. To distinguish any other non-religious moral conviction from religious moral convictions, we must adopt a case-by-case approach. Among other things, we may attend to people's first-person declarations about whether their conviction is religious, that is, whether they see it as emanating from a recognised system of spiritual belief. But, people's first-person declarations are not always determinative. If there is no recognised system of spiritual belief behind a person's conviction (despite what she thinks), then it is not a religious conviction regardless of what she says. (A person might believe she has a moral duty to do as the flying spaghetti monster tells her, but her belief isn't a religious moral conviction because there's no recognised system of spiritual belief behind it. Or she might believe that the New Testament requires her morally to wear blue, but her belief is not a *religious* moral conviction because there is no such requirement in the New Testament.) Conversely, if there is a recognised system of spiritual belief behind the conviction, then it may well be a religious conviction even if the person does not acknowledge that it is.

In what follows, I will bracket the case in which religion pervades all aspects of people's lives down to their views about the morality of supporting particular politicians. I will take a common-sense view of which issues are matters of religious moral conviction and which are not, while acknowledging that it is arbitrary to say that (in general) politics is not a matter of religious conviction, but clothing, recreation, physical movement such as dancing or singing, reproduction, and education can be.

2. Cultural Trappings

[13] At the risk of overgeneralising, the paper will take a common-sense approach to examples of non-religious convictions while acknowledging that, in some communities, the convictions in question may be religious convictions.

The comprehensive influence that a system of belief can have on our lives is not unique to spiritual systems of belief. Most of us, be we religious or not, are members of close-knit non-religious associations, such as families,[14] friendships, business partnerships, sports clubs, recreational clubs, and political associations, that bring with them a sense of meaning, identity, and purpose as well as the threat of expulsion, shame, and guilt if we deviate too far from the defining convictions of the group. Marriages sometimes disintegrate when a spouse admits to infidelity, commits a crime, or changes religious outlook. Families sometimes disintegrate when a child is homosexual or brings home a partner from a different ethnic background. Indeed, families sometimes disintegrate when a child breaks with a generations-long commitment to a political party. As these examples and the story of Owen Wingrave show, families can be defined by their commitment to a set of convictions such that they will sacrifice a child for the sake of them.[15]

We might think that, outside families, non-religious convictions are not dearly held and, hence, the threat of expulsion for non-conformity is modest. But, this isn't generally true. Non-religious communities can be deeply committed to certain convictions and can make it highly costly for people to depart from them. First, friendships and looser associations can disintegrate for the same reasons that families can, when one person steps too far outside what the other associates can accommodate within their association, such as through changes in sexuality, sexual behaviour, religion, or political affiliation. Friendships can also disintegrate for reasons related to the specific commitments that animate the friendship. Consider, for example, a committed Manchester United fan who values the buddies with whom he goes to games and who thinks he has a duty of loyalty to support the lads on the team; he wouldn't cheer for the opposing team during a game. Similarly, consider a Republican public servant who wants to progress within the party. He wouldn't openly argue for financial contribution reform any more than a Democrat would openly oppose abortion. If a Republican were to argue for campaign finance reform,

---

[14] I have labeled as 'non-religious associations' those associations that people can have regardless of whether they're religious, but I acknowledge that, for some religious people, associations such as 'family' or 'marriage' are religious associations. For instance, two people are 'married in the eyes of God'.

[15] Of course, the fact that certain cultural trappings exist does not mean that they should exist. I thank Tom Parr for pressing me to highlight this fact. In personal correspondence, he states: 'Plausibly, parents should not seek to impose certain kinds of values on their children…let alone be willing to sacrifice a child for these convictions.'

he might end up working for the only people left in town who will hire him – the Democrats.

Second, whole societies can be defined by non-religious moral convictions that brook no opposition. Consider the US prior to the civil rights movement or South Africa under Apartheid. These societies offered little or no space for integrated friendships, housing, schooling, work places, marriages, or families.

Furthermore, the comprehensive influence that a set of beliefs can have on people's lives is not universal amongst spiritual systems of belief. Religious communities that wear their particular moral convictions lightly do not threaten members with expulsion for non-conformity. They may counsel, cajole, and criticise, but not shun. Moreover, many religious people are not active members of religious communities and so do not feel the acute pressures that tightly knit communities can impose.

But, even if this is all correct, a critic might argue that when religious moral convictions come with cultural trappings they make it *particularly* burdensome for people not to conform. In McEwan's story, Adam had a startling, visceral reaction to the blood transfusion that, presumably, he would not have had if he were not a Jehovah's Witness.

In response, Adam's reaction can be explained by the combined facts that 1) he was coerced into having the treatment and 2) he is convinced that the treatment is morally abominable. If a non-religious person were coerced to do something she found abominable, she might well respond in the same way. Suppose someone were coerced to donate blood to save the life of the man who intentionally killed her child. Or suppose, as in the cases of Jim and the Indians or Sophie's Choice, someone were coerced to forfeit the life of one person in order to save another. She might feel just as distressed as Adam does, and religion wouldn't come into it. Similarly, if she were to believe sincerely that taxation is abominable and were coerced to pay taxes, then she might react strongly, but her reaction would presumably be less visceral (if credible) since she wouldn't be confronted as vividly by the coerced act as Adam, Jim, or Sophie is.

A critic might argue that the burden of not conforming to a religious moral conviction includes more than social censure. It includes the interruption of a person's relationship with God (in a theistic religion). If the spiritual leaders of her religious

community condemn her, then she experiences a radical, incontestable demotion in her moral status in the community.[16]

In reply, the difficulty is that people outside the religious community will not agree that the stakes are as high as the people within it believe they are. Therefore, if outsiders have reasons to show additional toleration, it is because beliefs about damnation impose additional psychological pressure above and beyond the pressures of social conformity and exclusion. That said, since all norm-driven social connections place concerted pressure on us, the added psychological pressure of beliefs about damnation might be just gravy. Such beliefs may do more to orient their holders' attention than to pick out the central moral issues for them.

In sum, both religious and non-religious convictions can come, but need not come, with pressing cultural trappings that can make it very onerous for people not to conform to them. That pressure gives us a defeasible reason to be tolerant, if not accommodating, where possible.[17]

3. Epistemic Pedigree

Most of our moral convictions, be they religious or not, rely heavily on authority. An *authority-based* conviction is one in which our initial exposure to the conviction and the impetus to accept it stem from a source that we regard as authoritative. Such a conviction does not stem principally from our own perceptions, observations, and empirical experiments, or from our own reasoning, reflection, and analysis.

Sometimes, religious convictions are unabashedly authority-based rather than evidence-based or reason-based. They come from established doctrine, texts, tradition, and the accepted word of spiritual leaders or God (in theistic religions).[18]

Other times, religious convictions purport to be evidence-based, but are in fact authority-based when they are corroborated by spiritual leaders rather than by

---

[16] The word 'condemnation' shares its etymology with the word 'damnation'. To condemn someone in this sense is to doom her to punishment, to damn her to hell, or to inflict damage on her. When a spiritual leader condemns a member of the congregation, he not only negates her standing within the religious community, but also ostensibly interrupts her relationship with God.

[17] Moral convictions are different from mere preferences, as they are couched in deontic terms. Preferences that come with cultural trappings do not give us the same defeasible reason to be tolerant where possible that moral convictions give us. I thank Tom Parr for pressing me on this point.

[18] The belief in God itself is not necessarily authority-based. It may be intuitive, that is, a natural inclination of the mind. But, the belief that we have a duty to believe in God is most likely authority-based.

experts in the empirical field. (If they were corroborated by empirical experts, then they would still be authority-based, but not *religiously* authority-based.) For instance, if we're raised in a religious family, and our parents tell us there is a God who wishes us to behave in certain ways, and they point to features of the world as evidence for that fact, then, while we're children, we may well accept their authority and believe that there is a God, that we have a moral duty to believe in God, and that we have a duty to act as God wishes.

Still other times, religious convictions purport to be either reason-based or intuitive understandings of the mind, but they are ultimately authority-based when they track precisely the particular views advanced by a particular religious community.

The beliefs that there is a particular God, that we have a duty to believe in that particular God, and that we have a duty to act as that God dictates, might be presented as natural inclinations of a mind that has not been clouded or misdirected. But, such beliefs could equally be inclinations akin to our inclinations to be aggressive, to speak language, to have loss aversion, and to be social, that is, an inescapable part of who we are as human beings, but not necessarily a morally good thing or an epistemologically advantageous thing. Such inclinations would be fostered by a community that endorses them, thereby shaping them into a form friendly to that community and revealing the extent to which they are authority-based.

Most non-religious convictions purport to be evidence-based or reason-based. But, if we reflect on how we come to believe most of the things we believe, it is because some parent, teacher, friend, doctor, book, movie, site, newspaper, article, or other putative expert told us so. The necessary divisions of epistemic labour mean that most of our convictions, be they religious or not, or moral or not, have an authority-based pedigree. In the case of *moral* convictions, the 'authority' may not be a single source, but instead an agglomeration of cultural, familial, educational, historical, and fraternal sources.[19]

Also, many non-religious moral convictions take their cue from the moral convictions of the dominant religious traditions that inform the society's culture,

---

[19] Consider '…G. .A. Cohen's reflections on the connections between his life and his beliefs. Cohen was troubled by a "paradox of conviction": "there is a problem about how we manage to go on believing what we were raised to believe, in the face of our knowledge that we believe it because (in a certain sense…) we were raised to believe it". This unsettled him because "it raises questions about the rationality of those beliefs".' In *Cohen, If You're an Egalitarian, How Come You're So Rich?* p. 8. Quoted from Sarah Fine (2015 in progress), 'Political Philosophy and Autobiography'.

though there may be no open acknowledgement of that debt. For instance, two generations ago, most people in western societies, be they religious or not, were averse to homosexuality, premarital sex, pregnancies out of wedlock, female religious leaders, and female business leaders. Yet, many non-religious people would not have credited prevailing Judeo-Christian norms as the authority-base for their convictions.

Finally, both the firm cultural-embeddedness and the sheer cultural variety of many non-religious moral convictions are evidence that people come to believe them because the authoritative opinion-shapers within their community believe them.[20]

4. Epistemic Status

As claimed in the introduction, many core religious moral convictions enjoy a secure epistemic status within the communities that hold them. They are viewed by their holders not only as true, but also as secure against challenges from counterevidence or logical refutation. By contrast, most non-religious moral convictions are putatively insecure. They are viewed by their holders as true but vulnerable to revision on the basis of counterevidence or logical refutation. However, neither claim is universally true for either type of conviction.

In many cases, both religious and non-religious moral convictions are seen by their holders as impervious to counterevidence or logical refutation. One example of an impervious religious moral conviction comes in the conclusion of McEwan's story, where the Jehovah's Witnesses' conviction against blood transfusions proves to be enduring.

Examples of non-religious convictions that are impervious to revision based on counterevidence or refutation include the tribe-like loyalty of many sports fans who believe their local or national team is worth supporting – that they have a duty to support that team – even when none of the team's members are locals and it is a poor team. Consider the English football fans who identify with the song lyric: 'Thirty years of hurt never stopped me dreaming…'[21] Consider the Vancouver Canuck hockey fans who are persistently loyal even though the team has reached the Stanley Cup finals only three times in its 45 year history, has never won it, and is largely staffed by non-locals. Now, some might say that the poor quality or non-localness of a team is not

---

[20] For a discussion of situationism and our inclination to want and do what the people around us want and do, see Lichtenberg, Judith (2014), *Distant Strangers: Ethics, Psychology, and Global Poverty*. Cambridge University Press, 122ff.

[21] Broudie, Ian, David Baddiel, and Frank Skinner (1996), 'Three Lions'.

evidence against the claim that local people have a moral duty to support it. But, they must then give a coherent, credible ground for the duty. The ground that 'we've agreed together to do so' would have to turn a blind eye to evidence about the merits of doing that thing. Agreeing together to do something does not in itself generate genuine moral duties to do it: the value of the activity matters.

Another example is the tribe-like loyalty of many Democrat and Republican supporters. (When it became known that Sarah Palin's teenage daughter was pregnant, the evangelical base turned on a dime to fall in line behind her.)

By contrast, in other cases, both religious and non-religious moral convictions are seen as, or prove to be, vulnerable to defeat by counterevidence or refutation. For instance, many branches of Buddhism invite both lay practitioners and Sangha members to test the Buddha's teachings in their own experience, thereby inviting counterevidence to refute the teachings. The invitation is made confidently, but not disingenuously. In other words, in principle, the teachings are insecure and vulnerable to challenge, but teachers are confident that each person's committed, personal investigations will yield similar conclusions to those drawn by the Buddha.

Another instance comes from people abandoning their religious community when confronted with the implications of holding true to its moral convictions. Parents of a homosexual child may walk away from their religious community that tells them their child's behaviour is abominable because they love and value their child, and cannot ultimately believe that it is a sin for their child to be who she is. The evidence doesn't support it.

In the case of non-religious moral convictions, people sometimes walk away from their political party, their long-time friends, their society, or their state when they cannot stomach any longer adhering to moral convictions that they believe are invidious, wrong, and counter to the evidence.

Conclusion

All of these points show that strong parallels exist between religious moral convictions and non-religious moral convictions. Each type of moral conviction can be deeply felt; each type can be deeply community-embedded; and each type can come with the threat of grave costs for non-conformity. For all of those reasons, both types of conviction deserve our toleration where possible, especially when the convictions satisfy credible tests for sincerity and seriousness.