

Sharia Law and Free Speech

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On 12th February, journalist Hamza Kashgari was deported from Malaysia back to his native Saudi Arabia to face the death penalty for posting on Twitter. On 16th January I was threatened at Queen Mary, University of London, that I would be 'tracked down' if I said negative things about the Prophet Mohammed. My talk was then cancelled.

These are not the same – I am safe, the police came to my aid, and I am not facing prosecution – but they are coming from the same place; perceived insults to Islam.

Last week, Maryam Namazie and I spoke on behalf of the [One Law for All](#) campaign at the rescheduled meeting at Queen Mary, and we are grateful to the organisers for having us back. In case you were wondering what all the fuss was about, and why anyone would threaten violence to stop us from speaking, I will give an outline of what it is that Maryam and I said.

There exists in Britain a network of sharia family 'courts'. They are the Muslim Arbitration Tribunal and the Islamic Sharia Council. The former operates under the powers of the Arbitration Act, and the latter is a registered charity. They both operate a system of family law which is expanding and has created a parallel legal system on family matters for Muslims. It is taking us to an increasingly divided and fractured society where application of the law is subjective and based on personal belief.

The men who run these bodies are real charmers – they believe men should be able to rape and beat their wives. They believe a woman's word is worth only half of a man's, and they believe children are the property of their fathers (custody of children goes to men on divorce regardless of what is best for the child, or how abusive the father might be – this is entirely contrary to English law). Some women are beginning to speak out against these 'courts' and the stories they tell are more and more disturbing. Women are being seriously abused here and we have to say so – while we're still allowed.

We like to be awfully relative these days; nobody is to blame for anything, and nothing is good or bad in itself. I disagree, but regardless of relativism and its successes (especially on the political left) there is still such thing as the truth, and telling it is becoming difficult and dangerous.

Talking about the sharia system in Britain is not an easy thing to do, but the brilliant Atheist, Secularist and Humanist (ASH) societies (whose conference I spoke to on Saturday morning) keep marching on regardless. Maryam and I have been invited by many ASH societies to speak about sharia, including the London School of Economics (LSE), though I do wonder if we would be welcome there again. Not long after my cancelled speech, the LSE student union passed a motion aimed at cracking down on telling the truth – but only if it happens to offend someone.

This leaves us with very little wiggle room unfortunately because somebody is always going to be offended by something – or can pretend to be offended even when they're not. This gives a right of censorship to anyone who wants it; but it is what the LSE seems to think appropriate, particularly when it comes to Islam. The Union has taken it upon itself to define Islamophobia as "a form of racism expressed through the hatred or fear of Islam, Muslims, or Islamic culture, and the

stereotyping, demonization, or harassment of Muslims, including but not limited to portraying Muslims as barbarians or terrorists, or attacking the Qur'an as a manual of hatred". But hang on a minute.... "hatred or fear of Islam"? Who decides what constitutes hatred and are we now being told what we can and can't be afraid of? The motion also outlaws "attacking the Qur'an as a manual of hatred"? Perhaps they can be a bit more specific? For example, if I comment upon violence or misogyny in any holy book, am I the one in the wrong? What about the violence and misogyny contained within the book? Is that subject to the same rules?

Something stinks here. The truth and fair comment is under attack.

The London School of Economics has got no right to dictate to the rest of us what we can or cannot say about Islam or sharia. None. It has decided that talking about human rights abuse is a greater problem than the human rights abuse itself. It is shameful. And it is all the more shameful because talking about this is the only weapon protestors have. Hamza Kashgari now faces losing his life and the LSE has implicitly agreed with the Saudi judges that they may well have a point. Well, why not? He offended people after all. Sharia law imposes the death penalty for blasphemy in many countries, and people are dying for speaking out. We have to take a side on this – and it's got to be the side of freedom and rights.

For the record, I have nothing against Islam per se. I would never ever object to or try to prevent Muslims practicing their religion. But when any practice is an abuse of human rights, it must be opposed by those of us who believe in human rights. I'm not against sharia family law because it's got anything to do with Islam, I'm against it because it abuses human beings, especially women.... and I insist upon my right to say so.

Free speech does not belong to the LSE for it to trade away. It would be a far greater use of the student union time if they objected to the beatings, rape, cruelty and humiliation inflicted upon Muslim women every day in this country, and stopped trying to make life so much harder for those of us who do.

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Anne Marie Waters was a member of the NSS. The views expressed in our blogs are those of the author and may not necessarily represent the views of the NSS.

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