

Freedom of expression under threat by violent extremists

Posted: Tue, 17th Jan 2012 by Ann Marie Waters

This week I was due to give a talk to students at Queen Mary University of London on behalf of the [One Law for All Campaign](#), London on sharia law and human rights. Rather fittingly – and as if to prove my point - my human rights were quashed by a person demonstrating one of the effects of sharia law; the threat of violence for criticising religion.

Just before I was due to start, a young man entered the lecture theatre, stood at the front of the room with a camera and proceeded to film everyone in the audience. That done, he informed us that he knew who we were, where we lived and if he heard a single negative word about the Prophet, he would track us down. (I am told he made further threats as he left the building).

The organisers of the event, Queen Mary's Atheism, Secularism and Humanism Society called the police and the event was unfortunately cancelled.

On reflection of the incident, I am left wondering what exactly we could have done. I would love to say that we stood up to him and carried on bravely in a valiant defence of free speech, but it was a frightening experience and I know that people felt genuinely threatened and upset. In any case, is it the role of speakers and students to face off against potentially violent Islamists in defence of our free speech, risking our safety in the process? Just whose job is it to defend freedom of speech and can we be expected to fight for it when the state and other powers refuse to back us up?

Question: can you remember the last time you heard the Government – or any political party – give a robust and dogged defence of free speech? No, neither can I. But there have been plenty of opportunities.

Take the Danish cartoon affair for example. Look at the pathetic response of the British Government at the time; "There is freedom of speech, we all respect that ... But there is not any obligation to insult or to be gratuitously inflammatory. I believe that the republication of these cartoons has been unnecessary. It has been insensitive. It has been disrespectful and it has been wrong." Even the UN said it would investigate whether the cartoonists were racists. How can we expect people in a university lecture hall to stand up to violent threats when this is the reaction of our leaders? The message is very clear – don't insult religion. And if you do, and you get in to trouble for it, you have only yourself to blame (or "don't come crying to us"?)

Freedom of speech needs to be defended from above. We need prosecution and punishment of those intent on frightening people into staying silent. Until the state speaks out and makes it clear to the likes of this guy that this behaviour is not acceptable – no excuses, no apologies – these things will continue to happen and more and more people will be frightened in to shutting up. We can then say goodbye to freedom for good."

[Read our news coverage of the story.](#)

N/A

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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