

## Speech to Libre Pensée

A speech to the French Society of Freethinkers (Libre Pensée) delivered by NSS Executive Director, Keith Porteous Wood, at their meeting in the Senat Building (French Parliament), Paris on 22 March 2008.

Good morning, fellow freethinkers. Accompanying me today is the President of the National Secular Society, Terry Sanderson, and we bring with us greetings from the Council of the NSS and our members.

We very much value the warm relationship between our two venerable organisations. Our co-operation leads to significant tangible benefits for us both.

Libre Pensée is without question the Society nearest to our own heart in terms of objectives and history than any other one in the world. So, I regard Libre Pensee as a kind of second home. The pleasure is made even greater meeting here, because Paris is a city that I have loved since first visiting it as a child.

Towards the end of last year I was privileged to take part in some formal meetings of the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva as an International representative of IHEU.

But what I found there in the meetings still troubles me deeply, and I want to share my concerns with you.

I had expected to find a secular institution engaged in healthy debate. What I found was that the speeches were dominated by the fifty to sixty countries who are members of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC). They were blaming everyone else for anti-Islamic feeling and calling for laws to silence Islamophobia, as they call it. One soon got the impression that to mention Human Rights abuses in Islamic countries in the Council chamber would be regarded as a kind of blasphemy.

Much is made there of a document called the Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam. How does the Cairo Declaration compare with the Universal Declaration on Human Rights? Everything - yes everything - in the Cairo document is subject to Shariah law. It actually says so. So lawyers agree that it is completely incompatible with the Universal Declaration.

The Cairo Declaration was ratified by the OIC back in 1990, when it was regarded simply as a guide for Islamic countries on the application of Human Rights. Gradually, since then, the OIC has succeeded in raising its status and I am convinced that their intention is for it to supplant the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, at least in Muslim countries.

Ironically, many of the disadvantaged people whose voices are suppressed in OIC countries are those in most need of the protection of the Universal Declaration.

So-called Apostasy is punishable by death in just six countries, all of them Islamic. They include Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Afghanistan. In Iran apostasy will additionally become a capital offence in civil as well as Shariah law later this year. The list of countries where homosexual acts are capital offences is similar. In Nigeria, the death penalty for homosexual acts applies only in the 12 Northern provinces, the same twelve which have Sharia law.

What I found most shocking of all in Geneva was that opposing voices were depressingly few. Most of the Western nations seem simply to have given up. The United States, for example, says very little.

The Human Rights Council is itself a second attempt by the UN to oversee Human Rights. Prior to this, a Commission was charged with the task, but it became totally discredited. Sadly, the Council that has replaced it is doing no better.

The principal objective of the OIC countries at the moment is to press for legislation in as many countries as it can to outlaw what they describe as 'defamation of religion', which seems far wider in scope than even blasphemy. I am convinced it would seriously compromise freedom of expression, interfere with democratic debate and allow extremists to silence their critics.

References were repeatedly made in Geneva by OIC delegates to the so-called Danish cartoon crisis, although they were careful not to mention that the crisis was fomented by Islamic clerics long after the original publication of the cartoons, and was certainly not created by the Danes. But referring incessantly to the cartoons enables the OIC countries to paint themselves as victims in need of protection by further anti-freedom of expression laws.

Roy Brown, former president of IHEU, works tirelessly in Geneva under huge pressure on these matters. I pay tribute to his fortitude, and his vision. I am working with IHEU to alert politicians and diplomats in international organisations such as the Council of Europe, the European Parliament and the Inter-Parliamentary Union, to try to raise awareness of this cancer in our Human Rights machinery. Please do anything you can to raise awareness of the problems I have outlined relating to defamation laws, the Cairo declaration and the Council itself. Catherine le Fur will be able to give you more information.

I promise to conclude on a much happier note, if you will bear with me for a couple more minutes. I have always been embarrassed that the mediaeval blasphemy law remains in force in England and Wales. The UN Special Rapporteur on Religion and Belief criticised the law in a recent report. Of course they used to execute people for contravening it. And even in the 20th Century, one of Terry Sanderson's predecessors as President of the NSS, G W Foote, was imprisoned. One of our supporters, an old man, died prematurely because he was jailed with hard labour, ironically also for a supposedly irreligious cartoon. Let us pause for a moment of silence to remember the many victims of blasphemy law, throughout the centuries and throughout the world – including your own Chevalier de la Barre.

Now the good news, for which you have been waiting so patiently. I am delighted to tell you that our House of Lords voted for abolition of blasphemy law in England and Wales earlier this month, so the abolition is now assured. And I am proud to tell you that it was one of our Society's sponsors in the House of Commons and my sponsor in the House of Lords who forced Parliament into making this long-overdue reform.

Keith Porteous Wood,  
NSS Executive Director.  
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