

Why Freedom of speech and expression is so important.

In a free society, the right of every citizen to say what is on their minds and to exchange ideas with their neighbour is of utmost importance.

Societies where ideas flow freely prosper. A healthy society is one where people are free to express their philosophical, religious and political beliefs and to organise around them. Science and knowledge flourish where there is free exchange of ideas and debate.

Freedom itself cannot be separated from the freedom to speak.

Without freedom of speech, there can be no democracy.

Yet, increasingly there are efforts to limit what we can say and which ideas we can express or critique. And when it isn't governments suppressing debate, more often than not, it is organised religion.

Too often, those with the worst ideas make it impossible for better ideas to be heard - or even voiced.

Secular Charter

The creation of a just and equitable secular society in Britain

The National Secular Society seeks a society in which religion and the State are distinctly separated, and where human rights always take precedence over religious demands. We would like to see the following ten objectives incorporated into a written, secular constitution:

- There should be no established state religion.
- The state should not fund religious activities.
- The state should not fund religious proselytising in any form and the provision of all services using public money should be religiously neutral.
- The state should not prescribe, proscribe, or amend religious doctrine.
- The state should not interfere in religious hierarchies, nor interfere in issues strictly related to membership.
- No action by the state should have the primary effect of engaging in religious practice.
- No state action should have the primary effect of restricting religious practice.
- The state should not express any religious beliefs, or in any publication, speech, or other implement of state power such as currency, sworn testimony, oath of fealty to the state, or endorsements of national pride. The state should not imply any derivation of authority from any religious authority, nor should it express temporal supremacy in relation to religious belief or practice.
- Political leaders should not express religious preferences in the course of their duties.
- No religion or denomination should have the power to prescribe, proscribe, or amend civil or common law.

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FREEDOM OF SPEECH

Does it still mean anything?



THE THREAT TO **Freedom of Speech**

Freedom of expression is under unprecedented threat. Any broadcaster, commentator, or newspaper editor – whether from the left or the right – will confirm that they are operating under greater restrictions than they were ten, or even five years ago. For them, and their proprietors, self-censorship is rife, and is growing. They are worried about powerful, well-financed and litigious religious groups, as well as the criminal law.

Until relatively recently, we have taken for granted our freedom to argue, offend and mock.

But now there is a definite chill in the air surrounding free debate. Suddenly there is an insistent demand especially from some religious groups that we curtail what we say. We should respect their sensitivities, even if they do not respect ours, we shouldn't offend them however offended we are, and we shouldn't insult them, however insulted we are.

We have heard much in recent years from those intent on closing down freedom of speech, and so have newspaper editors who quake with some of the demands made of them.

Most of the threats to free expression come from an unhealthy and growing alliance between some religious groups and the State.

What do you think that the following have in common: Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*; Jerry Springer the Opera being broadcast by the BBC; and the Sikh play *Behzti* being staged in Birmingham? One answer is that all these protests were religiously motivated. The other is that no

prosecutions were taken out against those known to have broken the law in connection with the protests. This sends out a powerful and worrying signal: that the authorities do not value freedom of speech and will do nothing to protect it, especially if protests are religiously motivated.

The chilling effects and self censorship are already a very worrying feature in the UK today.

Free speech is a vital element of democracy and an essential tool to resolve contentious issues peacefully. Driving dissent underground impedes resolution and allows extremism to fester and extremists to thrive.

Furthermore, we should not allow the censors to control our cultural agenda - banning plays, having TV programmes taken off, burning books. We should be affronted and outraged by the attempts of religious extremists of all stripes to rob us of our artistic heritage, our right to question, mock and make fun of even the most revered ideologies. We must resist.

There must not be a right not to be offended in the UK, perhaps the most religiously diverse country in the world.

The Voltarian principle of hating what you say, but defending your right to say it, is easy to recite, but so much harder to put into practice.

But, if we are to live together successfully and harmoniously in all our diversity we must all embrace freedom of expression.

Is Freedom of speech relevant?

"Defence of free speech and expression is intrinsically linked to the defence of other rights. You cannot defend one without also defending the right to asylum, the right to strike and organise, labour rights, women's and children's rights, the right to live in a secular society, the right to equality and freedom, universal rights, the right to religion or atheism and belief as a private matter, the right to live lives worthy of 21st century humanity. You cannot defend humanity without defending its right to speak and express itself."

Maryam Namazie
Iranian Secularist



What is the "Chilling Effect"?

The "chilling effect" is an expression used to describe a situation where people or organisations self-censor their speech or writing for fear of attracting expensive libel suits or because they're intimidated by the threat of a violent response. Freedom of thought and expression cannot flourish under such duress and the free flow of ideas, information and knowledge suffers accordingly, often to the detriment of society and the progress of science and medicine.

The "chilling effect" suggests that freedom of speech and expression can be stifled not because of any law but by the fear generated by aggressive libel actions or violence.

In short, people are bullied into silence.

Gay Jesus and Salman Rushdie

There are two principle means by which the opponents of free speech suppress ideas they dislike or criticisms they'd rather not hear. The first is through using the courts – so-called 'lawfare' – and the second is through the use of violence and intimidation – or the threat of violence.

There have been two iconic cases – an example of each of these forms of attack on free expression. The first followed the publication of a poem "*The Love that Dares to Speak its Name*" (which sexualised Jesus) in *Gay News*. Christian campaigner Mary Whitehouse brought a private prosecution and secured a conviction against the editor, Denis Lemon. Though the Blasphemy Law was finally scrapped in 2007, there have been repeated attempts to extend it and re-introduce it by stealth through so-called "religious hatred" laws.

Obviously people who incite hatred of religious minorities are contemptible, but there is existing legislation covering incitement and public order to deal with this. These laws have a chilling effect on legitimate criticism of religious ideas and practices.

The second example involved direct threats to kill an author and to intimidate any shops or libraries that kept his book. The fatwa against author Salman Rushdie in 1988 more than any other single incident put the issue of free speech on the public agenda. Unfortunately the threat of violence and public disorder has proven very effective and few are prepared to stand up to it. For example: In 2004 after violent protests among the city's Sikh community, the Birmingham Repertory Theatre closed the play *Behzti* which offended some Sikh extremists.

In 2006, the Asia House abruptly cancelled the painting exhibition of Indian artist MF Hussain citing "security" grounds after protests by radical Hindus.

In 2008, a Waterstones book shop cancelled a reading by poet Patrick Jones after a group calling itself Christian Voice threatened to cause a disruption.

