

challenging religious privilege

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Dear Ms Allen

We are writing to express our deep concern about the disciplinary action recently taken against Louis Smith and Luke Carson. We urge you to withdraw the suspension handed out in relation to the video of Smith and Carson mocking Islamic prayer, and revise the 'Standards of Conduct' to protect athletes' fundamental right to free expression.

Whilst we fully understand your interest in protecting the integrity and values of the sport, we believe it is the censorious actions of British Gymnastics which has caused the greater harm to the sport and wider civil society.

In disciplining the two athletes on grounds of causing 'offence', British Gymnastics has contributed to a climate of censorship brought on by the unreasonable and reactionary views of some religious extremists. Rather than defending free expression, one of the most precious pillars of our liberal democratic society, you have chosen instead to side with extremists and patronise British Muslims by assuming they will take offence at the trivial actions of these two athletes.

British Gymnastics' condemnation and punishment of Louis Smith and Luke Carson will only serve to embolden the religious extremists who reject free speech and religious tolerance by demanding that Islam must not be mocked. As you will be aware, since the private video was leaked to the media, Louis Smith has been the subject of death threats. We urge you to consider whether by taking the actions it has, British Gymnastics has further endangered the safety of these two athletes by giving succour to those who seek to silence all criticism and mockery of their religion.

The concept of offence is of course vague and ill-defined. Punishing athletes for subjectively offensive speech or actions is highly problematic. At a time when the notion of offence to those with religious views is being used to control and punish people of all religions and none, the UK has an urgent responsibility to uphold freedom of expression in the face of religious extremism. This is a responsibility shared by UK Sport and British Gymnastics.

We therefore ask that you consider revising your code of conduct to ensure that athletes' fundamental right to free expression is protected.

We draw your attention to provisions contained within the Racial and Religious Hatred Act 2006 which was specifically amended to guarantee this important freedom. The Act, which created an offence in England and Wales of inciting hatred against a person on the grounds of their religion was amended accordingly:

*“Nothing in this Part shall be read or given effect in a way which prohibits or restricts discussion, criticism or expressions of antipathy, dislike, ridicule, insult or abuse of particular religions or the beliefs or practices of their adherents, or of any other belief system or the beliefs or practices of its adherents, or proselytising or urging adherents of a different religion or belief system to cease practising their religion or belief system.”*

Freedom of speech constitutes a fundamental human right. We urge British Gymnastics to consider whether its restriction of this right for athletes is legitimate, proportionate or conducive to the promotion of religious tolerance in the UK. We believe it is not.

We look forward to a formal response setting out whether in the light of the points we make, whether the Board would be prepared to reconsider its punishments and code of conduct. We are regarding this as an open letter.

Yours sincerely,

Terry Sanderson  
President, National Secular Society