

Maryam Namazie Named “Secularist of The Year”

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Maryam Namazie, inveterate campaigner for the rights of women and refugees in Islamic countries was named as the winner of the inaugural Irwin Prize for Secularist of the Year last Saturday.

Maryam received her prize — a cheque for £5,000, sponsored by Dr Michael Irwin — from Guardian journalist Polly Toynbee at a glittering event in London.

The happy crowd who arrived at the Montcalm Hotel on Saturday were also joined by Honorary Associates Dr Evan Harris MP, Joan Smith, Martin Rowson and Jonathan Meades. The hilarious entertainment was provided by top notch comedian Stewart Lee, who is co-author of Jerry Springer – The Opera. His joke about what happens if you lick a lollipop with the face of the pope on it doesn't bear repeating in a family e-letter.

Maryam Namazie received a standing ovation when the time came to reveal her as the winner. Introducing Maryam, Keith Porteous Wood, NSS executive director said: “Maryam is an inveterate commentator and broadcaster on rights, cultural relativism, secularism, religion, political Islam and many other related topics. The present revival of Islam has heightened interest in Maryam's work, and at last her writings are gaining a mainstream audience. She has spoken at numerous conferences and written extensively on women's rights issues, particularly violence against women.”

In her acceptance speech, Maryam acknowledged Mansoor Hekmat's role in inspiring an entire generation of secularists and spoke of the rise of the political Islamic movement and its attempts to dupe and silence opposition using rights language. She went on to say: “We need an uncompromising and shamelessly aggressive demand for secularism but again this is only a minimum if we are to ensure that human values are safeguarded and that the human being is put first and foremost. Today, more than ever, we are in need of the complete de-religionisation of society as well.”

Maryam is a well known campaigner for secularism and refugee and women's rights and against political Islam. She is host of TV International, a Central Council member of the Organisation of Women's Liberation, and director of the International Relations Committee of the Worker-communist Party of Iran amongst others.

Seven others had been nominated, including the Somali-born Dutch politician Ayaan Hirsi Ali, who has highlighted violence against Muslim women and Nicholas Hytner, director of Britain's National Theatre, who came under fire for staging the musical Jerry Springer – The Opera, which many Christians regard as blasphemous.

A lifetime achievement award for services to secularism was also made to veteran NSS campaigner Bill McIlroy. In over half a century of dedicated service to the NSS, Bill has been the full time employee and also editor of the Freethinker on several occasions. He is still on the NSS

council, although he is retiring from his duties at the end of the present term in November. Bill was completely unaware that this prize would be presented and received a rapturous reception as he came up to receive his award.

Billy McIlroy writes: “Superb” is a term to be used sparingly when describing a social function. But it is difficult to encapsulate in a word an adequate description of the luncheon and award ceremony organised by the National Secular Society at the Montcalm Hotel on October 8.

“The Award in question — the Irwin Prize 2005 — was donated by Dr Michael Irwin, an outspoken defender of the right to die. Dr. Irwin was recently struck off the medical register by the General Medical Council. But the reception accorded him on Saturday was an indication of the esteem he enjoys beyond the imposing portals of the GMC.

“Maryam Namazie was an ideal winner, being recognised here for her opposition to obscurantism engendered by church and mosque. Maryam Namazie fights on two fronts: against outright religious terrorists, like the murderers of Theo van Gogh, and soggy fence sitters who espouse political correctness.

“Journalist Polly Toynbee praised NSS campaigns against religious privilege and censorship. She referred to the untiring work of its Executive Director, Keith Porteous Wood.

Much credit is due to NSS vice president and Newslite editor Terry Sanderson. His involvement behind the scenes contributed greatly to the success of an impressive and enjoyable occasion.”

It is hoped that a DVD of the event will be made available soon.

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