

LSE Students Union “being manipulated by determined activists” over Mohammed cartoon

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The Atheist Secularist and Humanist Society (ASH) at the London School of Economics has been told by the Students Union that unless it removes a Jesus and Mo cartoon from its Facebook page it could be expelled from the Union. ASH had posted the cartoon "in solidarity with University College of London Atheist and Secularist group" which had been told by its own Student Union to remove the image.

The LSE Students Union (LSESU) said in a statement that the cartoon had been brought to their attention via a complaint by students - the number complaining varied from two to forty.

The statement continues:

"Upon hearing this, the sabbaticals officers of the LSESU ensured all evidence was collected and an emergency meeting with a member of the Students' Union staff was called to discuss how to deal with the issue. During this time, we received over 40 separate official complaints from the student body, in addition to further information regarding more posts on the society Facebook page.

"It was decided that the President and other committee members of the LSESU Atheist, Secularist and Humanist Society would be called for an informal meeting to explain the situation, the complaints that had been made, and how the action of posting these cartoons was in breach of Students' Union policy on inclusion and the society's constitution. This meeting took place on Friday 20th January at 10.30am. The society agreed to certain actions coming out of the meeting and these were discussed amongst the sabbatical team. In this discussion it was felt that though these actions were positive they would not fully address the concerns of those who had submitted complaints. Therefore the SU will now be telling the society that they cannot continue these activities under the brand of the SU".

This last sentence stops short of expelling them but is certainly reads as a veiled threat of expulsion.

The statement continues: "The LSE Students' Union would like to reiterate that we strongly condemn and stand against any form of racism and discrimination on campus. The offensive nature of the content on the Facebook page is not in accordance with our values of tolerance, diversity, and respect for all students regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality or religious affiliation. There is a special need in a Students' Union to balance freedom of speech and to ensure access to all aspects of the LSESU for all the ethnic and religious minority communities that make up the student body at the LSE."

ASH's president Chris Moos, responded by saying, "We firmly reject the allegation that actions of our members have 'sought to marginalise' anyone, have caused 'harm to the welfare of Muslim students' or constituted a 'targeted campaign.'"

Moos continued "Although we reserve the right to criticise religious ideas, as humanists we will always oppose any targeted campaign against any community. We strongly oppose any form of anti-Muslim prejudice. The cartoons criticise religion in a satirical way. They do not target or call for the targeting of Muslims or any other religious group. Framing the criticism of religion as 'discrimination' or 'Islamophobic actions' is highly misguided and results in the stifling of valid debates. We do not discriminate amongst religions in our criticisms."

The Students' Union has scheduled an Emergency General Meeting (EGM) for Thursday 26 January at 1:00pm with two separate motions, one on antisemitism and the other on Islamophobia.

"There will be two separate motions which will lay out what these types of discrimination incorporate and that the SU stands against them," said Sherelle Davis, Anti-Racism Officer. "(...) the Islamophobic actions taken by certain campus groups have brought these issues to the forefront of race relations at the moment and it's important the SU take a stance on it."

The Students' Union issued the following statement to further reiterate their stance on religious discrimination on campus:

"The LSE community's values of tolerance, diversity, and respect for all students regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality or religious affiliation are not in accordance with the offensive nature displayed in the recent cases of antisemitism and Islamophobia. We respect the need for freedom of expression and discussion, but believe there must be a balance between respecting freedom of speech and protecting the communities that make up the student body at the LSE."

Terry Sanderson, President of the National Secular Society, said: "These statements by the Student Union are deeply shocking. They appear to be prepared to sacrifice the primary principle of free speech on the altar of claimed offence. The cartoon at the centre of this scandal is extremely mild and in no way inflammatory, threatening or abusive. It is nothing more than very light satire."

"If it is now being suggested – as the Students Union's ridiculous statement seems to suggest – that it is in some way 'racist' or threatening, then we have reached a point where rational argument has flown out of the window. Islam is not a race, it is a set of theological ideas that should not be immune from criticism."

"We all want to protect individuals from being threatened or intimidated. This cartoon does neither. Conflating criticism or satire of Islam with persecution of Muslim people is crazy, but it is regrettably on the rise. We risk here introducing a form of blasphemy law that has proved so evil and lethal in countries like Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. The Students Union seem blind to the fact that they are being pushed into a very oppressive place by determined and manipulative activists."

"The NSS calls on the LSE Students Union to come to its senses and get this in proportion. We will support the ASH Society in their actions to protect the precious principle of free expression."

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