

MP says Government's silence over Louis Smith heralds "unwritten blasphemy law"

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Conservative MP Charles Walker has sharply criticised the media for unleashing "a torrent of venom" against Louis Smith, and said the Government was "nowhere to be seen" when it should have been defending free expression.

Mr Walker [said](#) the Government's silence over the hounding and death threats against Louis Smith "heralds, de facto, the reintroduction of an unwritten blasphemy law, enforced by threat and thuggery."

He said the episode "shamed our nation and its laws."

"In our liberal and open society, freedom of worship marches hand in hand with the freedom to lampoon religion. Quite simply, that is the deal."

Walker said after *The Sun* released the video of Smith lampooning Islamic prayers "sensationalist reporting of his actions in some sections of the media resulted in the gymnast's receiving multiple death threats."

Despite a "rich heritage of aiming both excoriating and gentle humour in the direction of Christianity", Walker said the BBC "placed itself firmly at the head of the mob."

He drew attention to a Radio 5 Live interview where the presenter defined as 'Islamophobic' as "sort of hateful or it can mean mimicking or it can be taking the mickey" and said Smith had been "very, very offensive" and "shameful".

In treating mockery of religion as "shameful" the presenter "placed a question mark over the motives and legacy of some of the UK's greatest deceased and living comedians," Walker said.

"Louis Smith is never going to be the world's greatest comedian, but we—and the BBC—should be blind to that fact, because the law applies as much to gymnasts as it does to joke-tellers."

He wrote to the BBC challenging why no condemnation of the death threats was made during the interview, despite the presenter finding time to condemn Smith, and warning that the "inquisitorial tone of the interview" heightened the "already significant threat to his wellbeing and safety."

In response the BBC said that the interview helped Smith, because it meant he could "appease" "people who might be angry with him."

Walker added that "the only person who is deserving of an apology is Louis Smith himself. He is owed an apology from the Muslim Council of Britain for its ridiculous overplaying of Muslim sensitivities towards their faith, for having toured the radio and television studios to be publicly humiliated and smeared, and for having missed his Olympic homecoming parade to visit mosques."

The MBC said that Smith's apology fell "well short of addressing the hurt caused against Muslims", which Walker described as "uncharitable nonsense from an organisation that strives to be taken

seriously."

Walker also said that British Gymnastics should apologise to Smith for its "cowardly decision" to suspend him and that the BBC had treated Smith in a "callous and cruel" way" and behaved in a "wicked and irresponsible way".

The National Secular Society has strongly welcomed Mr Walker's comments, particularly his criticism of the Government to be proactive in defending freedom of expression.

Campaigns director Stephen Evans said: "The sensationalising of this private video by the media, and particularly *The Sun*, only contributed to a climate of censorship brought on by the unreasonable and reactionary views of some religious extremists. Too few spoke out for Louis Smith's right to freedom of expression, and the Prime Minister gave a troubling and weak answer when asked about the case at Prime Minister's Questions last month."

When Mr Walker asked the Prime Minister about Louis Smith in November, Theresa May said that there "is a balance we need to find" and that Smith, despite being threatened with death, had a "responsibility to recognise the importance of tolerance of others."

In early December Walker asked the Home Secretary why she had failed to give voice to the importance of defending free expression "during the manhunt and vilification of the gymnast Louis Smith".

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