

Speech by Keith Porteous Wood to Council of Europe

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Council Of Europe – Parliamentary Assembly Freedom Of Expression and Respect For Religious Beliefs Speech Given By Keith Porteous Wood, National Secular Society In The Palais Du Luxembourg (French Senate Building), Paris, On 18 May 2006

We have heard a great deal from speakers representing religious viewpoints; the UK's National Secular Society seeks to represent an alternative perspective. The UK's Home Office (Ministry of the Interior) has released a report which showed that only 20% of the population regarded religion as important to their identity^[1]. The National Secular Society was founded in 1866.

By an extraordinary coincidence, this month is the 125th anniversary of the conviction of one of my forebears in the secular movement for publishing cartoons. G. W. Foote, editor of the Freethinker magazine, was imprisoned for 12 months for blasphemy. The Freethinker is still being published and I am holding up the current issue commemorating G.W. Foote which shows on the front page a reproduction of the cover of the edition reporting his conviction. It also shows two cartoons which resulted in blasphemy charges, which I invite you to see afterwards.

Let me make clear at the outset that I wholeheartedly support everyone's right to practise their religion or belief. And by that I include the right not to believe, or to change one's religion – something that not all religions of course accept.

I am not advocating wholesale insult of religion, but what I am seeking to clarify is the extent to which Freedom of Expression should be proscribed in this area by the law. I recognise of course the limitations laid down in Article 10 of the ECHR.

When tyrants wish to control the culture which they dominate, they must hasten to destroy the opposition and eliminate dissent. First to go is a free press, rapidly followed by the intellectuals. Soon, artists come into the firing line. We have seen this formula played out a hundred times in Europe, and I hope that we are wise to it by now.

The media and the intellectuals pose an obvious threat to the power of any dictatorship. They can expose the rottenness and corruption at the centre of any regime, they can question and analyse.

The creative community, on the other hand, pose a more insidious threat. They have at their disposal something that is more difficult to control – art. In the end, artists are by far the biggest threat to any dictator, because often their ideas are expressed indirectly, through suggestion, allegory and satire.

Their power is not always immediately recognised.

A fictional account can often say more about an event than even a documentary can because it can bring us into the immediate, emotional ambit of that event. This is what gives art its power, its ability to touch and move people, to make them think more deeply and to empathise with those who are being demonised.

But now we have new threats to the precious creative impulses of our artists. It is an ancient threat that seems to be re-emerging under new disguises.

Its name is blasphemy.

Blasphemy has a long and dishonourable history. It was invented by religious authorities who found it the perfect tool to remove threats to their hegemony. There is no defence against blasphemy. Once the accusation is made, it is often difficult to disprove.

Although in Western nations an echo of the blasphemy laws can still be found in legislation, mostly it is a forgotten and discarded concept.

In other parts of the world, however, it still has the terrible power it once had in Europe. In Pakistan, for instance, it is still a capital offence. We have seen terrible cases in that country recently of people arrested and put on trial simply because of unfounded accusations of blasphemy, sometimes from disgruntled neighbours or vengeful family members. If we want to see how terrible and unjust the effects of blasphemy laws can be, we need only look to the Islamic theocracies and tremble at the prospect of their re-emergence in Europe.

But now blasphemy has a new cloak. Its new name is “respect”. We are told that our freedom of speech – so precious, so hard-won – must now be curtailed in the name of “respect”. Respect for religion, respect for gods and prophets that many in Europe discarded years ago.

Already artists are on the front line. The Danish cartoon saga is well known to all of you, so there is no need to repeat the details – except to say that the cartoonists and the newspapers involved have been threatened with death, all in the name of “respect”. But doesn’t respect work both ways? Aren’t the grand traditions of open democracy, free expression, the unfettered right of artists to say what is in their minds, also worthy of respect?

Europe has fought countless wars to reach the stage it is at today. It is a civilised place, a place where we now know what censorship and repression of the press and of the arts and of intellectual life can lead to. We have seen countless despots all follow the same course in their pursuit of domination – Hitler, Stalin, Franco are recent examples – they control all means of communication, they punish those who dissent, they destroy that which is a threat.

Satire? Humour? Mockery? How important these traits are when tyranny is on the march, and how easily we are persuaded to give them up when their subjects claim “offence” or demand “respect”. Salman Rushdie, the writer, knows what it is to fall foul of the censors, the demanders of respect.

Most of his adult life has now been spent wondering whether his death will be by natural causes. His attackers were not prosecuted. The film maker Theo van Gogh wanted to say what he thought about Islam's treatment of women – he wanted to make his point through film. We all know what his creation brought him.

In Britain, a play that questioned the Sikh community was driven from the theatre by a stone-throwing mob of righteous censors, each demanding “respect” for their actions. They were not prosecuted.

These unpunished infringements of artistic freedom prompted what is now called “censorship envy” in the UK. This is when religion succeeds in suppressing something of which it does not approve and others are emboldened to try the same techniques. The Sikh riot prompted a Christian group to use intimidating tactics to stop the broadcast of a play called *Jerry Springer – the Opera* because they adjudge it to be blasphemous.

And the tide of censorship envy is now engulfing Europe. The Vatican rails constantly against films, books, TV programmes and art exhibitions which it considers “disrespectful”. Often it calls for them to be banned, and sometimes it succeeds – as it did in Britain with the satirical cartoon *Popetown*. Reports emerged just yesterday that the Bavarian Premier called for new laws against blasphemy. This comes hot on the heels of a Vatican aide telling a UNESCO conference here in Paris last week that the Mohammed cartoons were an abuse of human dignity and that every means possible should be adopted (presumably including new laws) to prevent this so-called abuse.

The UK Human Rights Group “Index on Censorship” noted a newspaper report that “members of other faiths frequently succeed in silencing blasphemy. It adds that Muslims seem to have an easier ride, political correctness and political cowardice combining to make producers especially wary of incurring their displeasure.”

But sometimes religion deserves to be disrespected. The horrendous and ongoing abuse of children in the Catholic Church demands to be exposed, the exploitative, money-grubbing cults need to be examined, and the manipulative political interference of religious leaders should be questioned. All these important, vital activities risk being curtailed if we allow the concept of blasphemy – or some similar privilege – to be re-introduced into Europe.

It is in all our interests to stop this now. It is our duty as democrats, as protectors of human autonomy and defenders of artistic expression to say no, no, no to those who want “respect” for ideas that many of us do not and will not respect.

As Europe becomes an increasingly multicultural continent, religion must grow up. It must join debate. It must not – not ever – be allowed to silence its critics and its mockers using the law.

If we do not call a halt to these demands now, we risk putting all that we treasure in our culture at risk.

The popular comedian Rowan Atkinson (he of Mr Bean and Blackadder fame) would have been here today if his commitments had permitted it. He became so frustrated at the UK Government's attempts to introduce a law that would have materially eroded freedom of speech that he was anxious to speak directly to Parliamentarians. This is an extract of what he said:

“Is a tolerant society one in which you tolerate absurdities, iniquities and injustices simply because they are being perpetrated by, or in the name of, a religion? And out of a desire not to rock the

boat, you pass no comment or criticism - so as not to cause discomfort to anyone, not to cause embarrassment. A society with a veneer of tolerance concealing a snake pit of un-aired and of course unchallenged views.

“Or is a tolerant society one where, in the name of freedom, the tolerance that is promoted is one of occasionally hearing things you don't want to hear, and of reading things you don't want to read? [A society] where it is encouraged to question, to criticise, and if necessary to ridicule any kind of ideas and ideals. And then the holders of those ideals have an equal right to counter-criticise, to counter-argue, to make their case. That is my idea of a tolerant society – an open and vigorous one, not one that is closed and stifled in some contrived notion of correctness.”

I have also been struck by some pertinent words by the UK's Index on Censorship's Chief Executive, Ursula Owen. She recently told a conference:

“The real defence of free speech begins at the point when people say something you don't like, even hate. If you can't defend their right to say it, then you don't believe in free speech.”

She applauded *The Independent* newspaper for observing that in Britain there is no right not to be offended, that our society is held together by the bonds of toleration, and the idea that one group can curtail the harmless enjoyment of another is unacceptable. No one was compelled to watch, for example *Jerry Springer – the Opera* on TV ... and that it's time for the tolerant majority in Britain to make its voice heard.

For her, the central question is “should people in a diverse, multicultural society be protected from offence and insult simply because they demand it in the name of religion, curtailing free speech where necessary? The answer from Index on Censorship has to be a resounding no. Most of our contemporary ideas about freedom of speech and imagination come from the Enlightenment. The battle for the Enlightenment was fought over the church's desire to place limits on thoughts and words. We may have thought we'd won the battle for ever, but we may not have...

“The trick surely is that one can be savage about what a person thinks, provided you aren't savage about them as a person. We need to keep our nerve, and persuade all citizens that being offended is an occupational hazard in a free society, that offensive words, whatever they are, whether about sacred or secular matters, should be answered with more words, and not with censorship. And we need a free press to reflect every point of view in this difficult debate.”

Another Human Rights group based in the UK, Women against Fundamentalism, contacted me just before this colloquy. They pleaded with me to tell you that, without European freedom of expression, their fight for freedom would be almost impossible. Any moves to compromise this freedom would impact disastrously on their ability to expose and resist the dreadful oppression to which women are subjected, often in the name of religion.

There is a growing clamour for Europe-wide or even worldwide laws to respect religion. But I ask legislators here to think twice before taking such a step. Such laws are likely to be unpopular. The UK Government has tried to impose a religious hatred law, allegedly to mollify the Muslim community, but the law was widely thought to be inimical to freedom of expression. Despite Tony Blair's substantial majority, the measures were defeated three times in five years. The law is now on the statute book, but only with comprehensive freedom of speech safeguards that his Government bitterly opposed.

I do not think it wise to impose any law that is as subjective as one outlawing the causing of offence would be. There would be endless disputes as to which religions should be so privileged, and the danger would be that it would be the demands of the most sensitive that would prevail. That would be a disaster for freedom of expression.

It is not religious sensitivities that need protecting, however, it is freedom of expression. And if there is to be any internationally imposed legislation on this topic it should be to reduce restrictions on freedom of expression, rather than create another tier of censorship that will frighten commentators and artists from raising controversial matters. Self censorship is a big danger here. Such matters are only resolved through healthy debate.

Freedom of expression is, I believe, the main bulwark of democracy. If we take it away, or simply fail adequately to protect it, we remove the means to safeguard the other democratic freedoms.

[1] [Home Office Research Study 274](#) Table 3.1

- [Home Office Research Study 274](#)