



Nigel Hurst
CEO, Saatchi Gallery
Duke Of York's HQ,
King's Road,
London, SW3 4RY

7 May 2019

Dear Mr Hurst

Religious offence

We were alarmed to read that the Saatchi Gallery has covered up paintings from its Rainbow Scenes exhibition featuring an Islamic declaration of faith following complaints from Muslim visitors who regarded the artworks as 'blasphemous'.

We note that the gallery has said it "fully supports" freedom of expression but added: "The gallery also recognises the sincerity of the complaints made against these works and supported the artist's decision to cover them until the end of the exhibition."

By making this decision the Saatchi Gallery 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, the gallery has chosen instead to listen to those that wish to censor that which they find offensive.

The fact some people take blasphemy codes seriously is not a reason for anyone else to do so. A specifically religious sense of taboo is not something that art galleries should be imposing on society at large.

As you will be aware, the common law offences of blasphemy and blasphemous libel were abolished in England and Wales in 2008. The upholding of de facto blasphemy codes under the guise of civility and politeness risks perpetuating religious taboos that violate the human right to freedom of expression and can serve to legitimise vigilantism, mob violence and persecution of those that are deemed to have broken them.

The right to freedom of expression is applicable not only to ideas that are favourably received or regarded as inoffensive or as a matter of indifference, but also to those that offend, shock or disturb the state or any sector of the population.

Although as a private institution the Saatchi Gallery has the right to censor work if it so chooses, its significant public profile endows it with a social responsibility to resist demands for censorship.

The gallery has 1.5m visitors per year and says on its website that it aims to provide an "innovative forum for contemporary art". The silencing of a powerful institution with a stated liberal mission will set a damaging precedent, giving succour to religious reactionaries who seek

to clamp down on dissenters and free thinkers. This remains true regardless of whether the decision to cover the paintings had the consent of the artist involved.

We therefore ask you to consider whether your approach has shown undue deference to religious sensitivities, placing unreasonable restrictions on artists' freedom of expression and the public's expectation to view artwork without the interference of censorship.

We understand that the Rainbow Scenes exhibition has now closed but ask for a commitment to review the decisions that were made in this instance in an attempt to limit the damage caused and protect free expression in future.

I consider this to be an open letter.

Yours sincerely,

Stephen Evans
Chief Executive