

# Maryam Namazie: Exploring religious freedom episode 03

Video available at: <https://youtu.be/v8kyAODx8Ac>

0:00:03.215,0:00:06.215  
Hello and welcome to Episode 3 of the National Secular Society podcast

0:00:06.215,0:00:08.695  
and Part 3 of in our series of interviews

0:00:08.695,0:00:11.895  
exploring religious freedom.

0:00:12.395,0:00:15.335  
I'm Alastair Lichten, Head of Education at the NSS

0:00:15.335,0:00:18.415  
and today I spoke with Maryam Namazie.

0:00:18.415,0:00:21.265  
Maryam is a founder of the Council of ex-Muslims of Britain

0:00:21.265,0:00:24.255  
and the 'One Law for All' campaign.

0:00:24.255,0:00:27.405  
The National Secular Society named her our 2005 Secularist of the Year

0:00:27.405,0:00:30.555  
for her work in defence of women's rights,

0:00:30.555,0:00:32.235  
and the right to freedom of expression.

0:00:33.140,0:00:35.985  
As you'll hear, despite her activism defending

0:00:35.985,0:00:38.780  
the rights of religious minorities, and for

0:00:38.785,0:00:40.955  
freedom of conscience, Maryam is sceptical of

0:00:40.955,0:00:43.395  
the term 'religious freedom', largely because of

0:00:43.395,0:00:46.375  
how it has been used by the religious right, and those making

0:00:46.380,0:00:49.205  
demands for religious privilege. I hope you will agree that

0:00:49.205,0:00:52.240  
it makes for an interesting interview, and I will be back

0:00:52.240,0:00:53.860  
at the end with a few comments. Enjoy.

0:00:56.615,0:00:58.505  
Alastair Lichten (AL): Maryam, welcome to the podcast.

0:00:58.965,0:01:01.585  
Maryam Namazie (MN): Hi, thank you for having me. AL: You're very welcome.

0:01:01.585,0:01:04.605  
You are involved in such a wide range of activism

0:01:04.605,0:01:07.375  
that I'm not sure how best to introduce you

0:01:07.375,0:01:10.595  
so perhaps you could start by telling the audience a little bit

0:01:10.595,0:01:14.055

about yourself and how you became a secularist activist.

0:01:14.625,0:01:17.335

MN: Well I'm originally from Iran and so of course

0:01:17.335,0:01:20.475

one of the main issues that I've been

0:01:20.475,0:01:23.145

dealing with is the fact

0:01:23.685,0:01:24.995

that's it's a theocracy there

0:01:25.385,0:01:28.295

and so a lot of my activism comes around

0:01:28.295,0:01:31.355

the issue of theocracy

0:01:31.355,0:01:34.465

the role of the religious right

0:01:34.465,0:01:37.355

which is the far-right movement, and

0:01:37.755,0:01:40.825

also involved in the state, and the laws

0:01:40.825,0:01:43.895

and educational system. And of course that's very much

0:01:43.895,0:01:46.835

closely linked with women's rights, refugee rights

0:01:46.835,0:01:49.635

I do think they are all interlinked with each other

0:01:49.765,0:01:52.715

as is all human rights issues.

0:01:52.935,0:01:56.225

And of course for me I think secularism is so key

0:01:56.225,0:01:59.485

in enabling people to have

0:01:59.875,0:02:02.795

basic rights and dignity, I think it's impossible

0:02:02.795,0:02:05.935

in a theocratic state or in

0:02:05.945,0:02:08.955

a situation where religion has

0:02:09.205,0:02:12.355

access or influence and so

0:02:12.355,0:02:15.105

I think that's what led me to becoming

0:02:15.105,0:02:17.375

more involved with secular issues.

0:02:17.745,0:02:20.665

AL: So you say that your background has informed

0:02:20.665,0:02:21.665

your personal view of religious freedom

0:02:24.345,0:02:26.525

and your professional view as well?

0:02:27.295,0:02:30.295

MN: Yes definitely. I think - obviously I would hope

0:02:30.295,0:02:33.515

that I would have reached this conclusion even

0:02:33.615,0:02:36.585

if I hadn't lived in a theocracy, because I think

0:02:36.585,0:02:39.255

you know, secular societies are

0:02:39.565,0:02:42.695  
the best societies for both believers

0:02:42.695,0:02:45.805  
and non-believers. Of course I know it's not  
the

0:02:45.805,0:02:47.975  
end-all and be-all. Of course

0:02:48.375,0:02:50.895  
there's a lot of things that

0:02:50.895,0:02:53.905  
people need in the 21st century to live

0:02:53.905,0:02:56.695  
dignified lives, but I do think that

0:02:56.695,0:02:59.225  
a secular framework is a minimum, at the very  
least,

0:02:59.225,0:03:02.185  
precondition, particularly for

0:03:02.185,0:03:05.135  
human rights, women's rights, the rights of  
LGBT and

0:03:05.135,0:03:08.055  
sexual and religious minorities and so on

0:03:08.055,0:03:09.055  
and so forth. So, I do think

0:03:09.355,0:03:12.545  
yeah, personally I've come to

0:03:12.545,0:03:15.605  
realise that, having lived in a theocracy,

0:03:15.605,0:03:18.855  
before that I guess religion was sort of in the

0:03:18.855,0:03:21.625  
background for me. I was supposedly

0:03:21.625,0:03:24.545  
born a Muslim because that's the situation for

0:03:24.545,0:03:27.915  
most people; they're born into a family and  
then

0:03:27.915,0:03:30.385  
they're immediately labelled as

0:03:30.415,0:03:33.365  
the religion of their family and so,

0:03:33.485,0:03:36.635  
you know, it was in the background for me  
because it wasn't

0:03:36.635,0:03:39.565  
very much part of my life even when I lived in  
Iran.

0:03:40.005,0:03:43.075  
But then when an Islamic state did come to  
power

0:03:43.075,0:03:45.275  
I did realise very quickly how

0:03:45.945,0:03:49.035  
detrimental it is. I think religious rule is the  
end

0:03:49.035,0:03:52.005  
of all forms of rights and freedom of

0:03:52.005,0:03:54.595  
expression and democratic politics.

0:03:54.995,0:03:58.045  
And you know secularism is therefore

0:03:58.045,0:04:01.145  
I think just a common-sense

0:04:01.145,0:04:03.905  
response and desire and demand of people

0:04:03.905,0:04:06.355

especially those who live in such situations.

0:04:06.355,0:04:08.665

0:04:08.665,0:04:11.895

AL: So if you can sum up, what does religious freedom mean to you personally?

0:04:12.775,0:04:15.725

I mean, I'm not sure I like the term 'religious freedom'

0:04:15.725,0:04:18.645

because it gives more status

0:04:18.965,0:04:22.055

to religion than it rightfully deserves.

0:04:22.055,0:04:25.025

I think the issue is

0:04:25.025,0:04:27.965

freedom of conscience, that we all

0:04:27.965,0:04:30.425

have the right to any belief, including

0:04:30.775,0:04:32.095

religious belief, but

0:04:32.535,0:04:35.495

that also includes the right to be free from religion,

0:04:35.495,0:04:38.455

the right to be atheist,

0:04:38.460,0:04:41.025

to be critical of religion

0:04:41.025,0:04:44.120

and so I think unfortunately

0:04:44.125,0:04:46.875

in this day and age, because of obviously

0:04:46.875,0:04:49.595

the privilege of religion and the power it has, as well as

0:04:49.975,0:04:52.825

the fear and intimidation it can impose on large

0:04:52.825,0:04:56.205

large segments of society,

0:04:56.205,0:04:58.775

that religious freedom seems to be the end-all of everything

0:04:58.775,0:05:01.815

that, you know, it has to be respected

0:05:01.815,0:05:04.805

no matter how many rights are violated

0:05:04.805,0:05:06.300

and no matter what the results are for people.

0:05:06.300,0:05:06.800

0:05:06.800,0:05:07.785

So I think yes, you know,

0:05:07.785,0:05:11.095

we need to stress the fact that people have

0:05:11.095,0:05:14.065

the right to belief, including religion,

0:05:14.065,0:05:15.825

even if we don't agree with

0:05:15.825,0:05:17.125

their belief.

0:05:17.125,0:05:20.085

But I think there's a difference

0:05:20.085,0:05:22.955

between having the right to believe something

0:05:22.955,0:05:25.785  
versus then having the right

0:05:25.785,0:05:28.155  
to manifest it and allow for

0:05:28.155,0:05:31.175  
religion to have a say in

0:05:31.175,0:05:34.425  
important aspects of people's rights and lives.

0:05:34.425,0:05:37.455  
AL: I guess a big part of this project is  
exploring

0:05:37.455,0:05:40.685  
how the term 'religious freedom' is misused.

0:05:40.685,0:05:42.475  
So for example

0:05:42.475,0:05:44.865  
to imply that it is a sort of

0:05:44.865,0:05:47.955  
absolute right that overrides all other rights.

0:05:48.585,0:05:51.905  
And also there's - I don't know if you agree - a  
sense among

0:05:51.905,0:05:54.985  
some people that religious freedom is

0:05:54.985,0:05:58.085  
something for religious people

0:05:58.085,0:06:02.775  
rather than actually being this wider

0:06:02.775,0:06:04.415  
freedom of or from religion or freedom of  
conscience

0:06:04.415,0:06:07.275  
- however you might like to change the label -

0:06:07.435,0:06:09.235  
that applies to everyone?

0:06:09.745,0:06:12.645  
MN: Yeah, definitely. I mean I think it is  
misused,

0:06:12.645,0:06:15.505  
and I think it is misused deliberately

0:06:15.505,0:06:18.505  
because we are in a situation

0:06:18.505,0:06:21.595  
now where we've got religious right

0:06:21.595,0:06:24.535  
movements and states in many countries.

0:06:24.535,0:06:27.615  
Of course the most prominent are the Islamic  
states.

0:06:27.615,0:06:30.165  
But we also have the rise of

0:06:30.165,0:06:33.175  
the religious right, or the religious  
fundamentalists

0:06:33.175,0:06:36.555  
- whatever you'd like to call them - in many  
different

0:06:36.555,0:06:39.145  
capacities including, for example, the Hindu  
right

0:06:39.145,0:06:42.145  
the Jewish right, the Christian right,

0:06:42.145,0:06:45.045  
even the Buddhist right

0:06:45.045,0:06:47.805  
in a place like Sri Lanka and Myanmar. And so  
I think

0:06:47.805,0:06:50.815  
it's deliberately so that it's considered

lead to the death penalty or long-term imprisonment.

0:06:50.815,0:06:53.975  
or portrayed as being absolute.

0:07:36.865,0:07:40.035  
Whereas in more secular societies we find

0:06:54.115,0:06:56.595  
Because it does help to keep religion -

0:07:40.035,0:07:43.105  
this argument being used more and more

0:06:56.975,0:07:02.855  
and the religious right which uses religion

0:07:43.105,0:07:46.165  
in order to impose sort of secular blasphemy and apostasy laws,

0:07:02.855,0:07:05.595  
for political purposes and for political power -

0:07:46.165,0:07:46.665

0:07:05.915,0:07:08.075  
it keeps it safe, in a sense,

0:07:46.665,0:07:50.115  
you know, with accusations of Islamophobia for example,

0:07:08.075,0:07:08.945  
from the criticism

0:07:50.115,0:07:53.135

0:07:08.945,0:07:11.875  
that it rightfully deserves.

but also the fact that it seems, you know,

0:07:11.875,0:07:14.515  
And that's why I think deliberately there is

0:07:53.135,0:07:55.915  
criticism of religion - and especially

0:07:14.515,0:07:17.435  
an effort to make it seem as if

0:07:55.915,0:07:59.135  
criticism of Islam in particular - is a no-go area.

0:07:17.435,0:07:20.175  
it's such an important absolute freedom

0:08:00.245,0:08:02.235  
And I think, you know, maybe part of it is

0:07:20.515,0:07:23.745  
that it's beyond criticism, and

0:08:02.235,0:08:05.645  
we shouldn't be using the term 'religious freedom'

0:07:23.745,0:07:27.005  
in a sense I think it's very much

0:08:05.845,0:08:08.145  
because the reality is that

0:07:27.005,0:07:30.125  
when you look at Islamic states where blasphemy or apostasy

0:08:08.625,0:08:11.885  
freedom of belief is much more

0:07:30.125,0:07:33.285  
is a law - you know that sort of criticism

0:08:12.075,0:08:15.235  
expansive and much more all-encompassing

0:07:33.285,0:07:36.675

0:08:15.235,0:08:18.285  
than religion only;

0:08:18.285,0:08:20.765  
it includes all forms of beliefs

0:08:20.765,0:08:23.245  
which as you mentioned includes

0:08:23.245,0:08:24.905  
atheism as well

0:08:25.265,0:08:28.425  
- being free from religion.

0:08:28.425,0:08:29.206  
And that's so key as well

0:08:29.206,0:08:32.505  
in this whole concept of freedom of  
conscience.

0:08:32.505,0:08:35.555  
I think one of the things that is very clear

0:08:35.555,0:08:38.955  
at least for those of us who are involved in  
secular activities,

0:08:39.085,0:08:42.035  
and also those of us

0:08:42.035,0:08:44.775  
who've lived under theocracies or seen

0:08:44.775,0:08:47.735  
what theocratic rule means

0:08:47.735,0:08:48.845  
for people's lives

0:08:49.195,0:08:52.105  
and the right to believe - we can

0:08:52.105,0:08:55.535  
see very clearly that it affects not just non-  
believers or

0:08:55.565,0:08:58.565  
atheists like myself, or ex-Muslims, but also

0:08:58.565,0:09:01.535  
very much believers, because not every

0:09:01.535,0:09:04.575  
believer agrees with religious  
fundamentalism,

0:09:04.575,0:09:07.315  
wants to live religion in the way that

0:09:07.315,0:09:10.245  
is imposed by those fundamentalists.

0:09:10.245,0:09:13.260  
Because after all if we agree that it's a private  
matter,

0:09:13.260,0:09:15.920  
if it's a private belief, then it needs to be

0:09:16.080,0:09:19.015  
adhered to and believed in any way

0:09:19.015,0:09:21.865  
one chooses as a private matter, as an  
individual matter.

0:09:22.325,0:09:25.065  
AL: You've often worked with secularists

0:09:25.065,0:09:28.105  
from faith backgrounds and there is

0:09:28.105,0:09:29.415  
I think, a perception that

0:09:29.725,0:09:32.715  
freedom from religion, or secularism,

0:09:32.715,0:09:34.855  
is only for non-religious people.

0:09:34.855,0:09:36.315

0:09:36.965,0:09:38.895  
How do you think that can be overcome?

0:09:39.325,0:09:42.225

MN: Well, I think again that's part of the propaganda of the religious right.

0:09:42.225,0:09:45.015

Look, when you live in a world in which

0:09:45.015,0:09:47.645

they have power and influence

0:09:47.995,0:09:50.975

and also are very well-versed in

0:09:50.975,0:09:53.645

threatening and in silencing

0:09:53.645,0:09:57.005

and censoring people, you know

0:09:57.005,0:10:00.105

not just individuals but even states and

0:10:00.105,0:10:02.005

public policy - they have such a lot

0:10:02.385,0:10:04.265

of influence and access

0:10:04.875,0:10:08.015

even in more secular societies like here in Britain,

0:10:08.065,0:10:11.075

it's obvious that there'll be the sort of

0:10:11.075,0:10:14.305

negative propaganda against secularism,

0:10:14.305,0:10:17.255

and against atheism, for example.

0:10:17.255,0:10:19.255

But I do think that actually

0:10:19.255,0:10:22.305

people who come from faith backgrounds,

0:10:22.305,0:10:25.025

who live in so-called

0:10:25.025,0:10:28.245

minority communities and who have

0:10:28.245,0:10:31.245

possibly fled from theocratic

0:10:31.245,0:10:34.595

states and movements,

0:10:34.595,0:10:37.695

I think actually they know better than anybody else

0:10:37.695,0:10:40.555

how important secularism is

0:10:40.555,0:10:43.585

for their lives. And actually that's why

0:10:43.585,0:10:46.685

the vast majority of people who flee their countries,

0:10:46.685,0:10:49.675

many of those countries they're fleeing

0:10:49.675,0:10:52.775

are countries where religion is in the state,

0:10:52.775,0:10:55.175

or has a great amount of strength.

0:10:55.175,0:10:57.505

But also they're fleeing towards secular societies - there's a reason for that:

0:10:57.505,0:11:00.155

people are voting with their very feet.

0:11:00.155,0:11:03.145

So I do think that there is a level

0:11:03.175,0:11:06.185

of propaganda that unfortunately



0:11:06.185,0:11:08.925  
some secularists and atheists have

0:11:08.925,0:11:12.135  
bought into as well. You know, always on the defensive;

0:11:12.135,0:11:15.275  
you know, you hear about how

0:11:15.275,0:11:17.775  
atheism is a negative word:

0:11:17.775,0:11:20.195  
well it's not a negative word.

0:11:20.195,0:11:23.585  
It's very positive in my opinion,

0:11:23.715,0:11:26.655  
being able to say you're an atheist

0:11:26.655,0:11:29.795  
especially in the conditions that we live in today

0:11:29.795,0:11:32.375  
It's a celebration of free thought and

0:11:32.375,0:11:35.455  
we shouldn't hide from using it.

0:11:35.455,0:11:38.025  
And secularism, again, of course secularism's not just for atheists,

0:11:38.225,0:11:41.175  
but again it's not a dirty word and I think

0:11:41.175,0:11:44.645  
we do need to unconditionally and unequivocally

0:11:44.695,0:11:48.025  
- shamelessly really - we do need to defend secularism.

0:11:48.075,0:11:51.125

And not a wishy-washy version of secularism

0:11:51.125,0:11:54.385  
which is 'all religions are equal and equally valid'.

0:11:55.345,0:11:58.525  
Well, you know, religions are just

0:11:58.595,0:12:01.445  
really bad news for society.

0:12:01.445,0:12:04.595  
I'm not talking about people's personal beliefs - of course they have a right to it.

0:12:05.315,0:12:08.245  
But when you're talking about it in the state,

0:12:08.245,0:12:11.495  
or the law or public policies, it's no longer a question of

0:12:11.575,0:12:14.825  
personal belief; it's about power, it's about control, it's about

0:12:14.825,0:12:17.895  
managing and silencing dissent -

0:12:17.895,0:12:20.755  
women, sexual minorities and so on and so forth

0:12:20.755,0:12:23.835  
so it's important to have that framework and it's important for secularists

0:12:23.835,0:12:27.105  
to defend that network for believers and non-believers.

0:12:27.105,0:12:29.915  
AL: Religious authoritarians of various different types

0:12:30.395,0:12:32.845  
often cloak their demands in the language

0:12:32.845,0:12:36.235  
of religious freedom.

0:12:37.245,0:12:40.265  
How can we challenge that without simply

0:12:40.265,0:12:43.095  
just abandoning this label, this term,

0:12:43.095,0:12:46.515  
'religious freedom' to them?

0:12:46.595,0:12:48.915  
MN: Well yes as you say, you know,

0:12:49.300,0:12:52.280  
religious fundamentalists, theocrats,

0:12:52.280,0:12:55.120  
they are using rights language,

0:12:55.125,0:12:58.315  
and not just with the term 'religious freedom'

0:12:58.315,0:13:00.305  
but they're also using it for example

0:13:01.395,0:13:02.395  
with tools that are

0:13:02.925,0:13:05.975  
really mean to manage and

0:13:05.975,0:13:09.095  
oppress women and those who dissent

0:13:09.095,0:13:12.095  
for the right or choice to the veil,

0:13:12.095,0:13:14.895  
or the right or choice to segregation

0:13:14.895,0:13:17.995  
or sharia courts. These are tools used

0:13:17.995,0:13:21.085  
to manage and control people but they do

0:13:21.085,0:13:24.085  
use rights language as a way of justifying it

0:13:24.085,0:13:27.005  
and legitimising it, and this is nothing new.

0:13:27.065,0:13:29.695  
I mean, we've seen it throughout history  
where

0:13:29.765,0:13:32.675  
those who are trying to oppress will use  
language

0:13:32.675,0:13:35.675  
in order to justify what they're trying to do.

0:13:35.675,0:13:38.645  
If you recall, during racial apartheid in South  
Africa

0:13:38.645,0:13:42.105  
for example, there was discussion that

0:13:42.225,0:13:45.255  
separating blacks and whites is

0:13:45.255,0:13:48.225  
not inequality, that people are

0:13:48.225,0:13:51.175  
separate but equal

0:13:51.175,0:13:53.975  
you know, and we hear these

0:13:53.975,0:13:56.345  
very same arguments when trying to justify

0:13:56.915,0:13:59.635  
sexual segregation for example.

0:13:59.635,0:14:02.125  
Whether it's in universities here in the UK

0:14:02.125,0:14:04.945  
or in other countries.

0:14:04.945,0:14:07.405 So I think the fact that they use this language is -	And also I think it's important because
0:14:07.405,0:14:10.595 because they do need to justify what they do	0:14:48.275,0:14:51.225 we live in a time when
0:14:10.595,0:14:13.545 otherwise it's so abhorrent I think	0:14:51.225,0:14:52.225 there is cultural relativism and
0:14:14.035,0:14:15.445 if there wasn't this sort of	0:14:52.425,0:14:53.965 where we find that beliefs
0:14:16.055,0:14:18.875 you know lovely sort of	0:14:54.295,0:14:57.675 are given more importance -
0:14:18.875,0:14:22.265 non-threatening language around the issue.	0:14:57.785,0:15:00.585 culture, belief, religion - is given
0:14:22.265,0:14:25.385 It would be too naked for the people	0:15:00.585,0:15:03.485 more importance than people
0:14:25.385,0:14:26.385 to be able to tolerate.	0:15:03.485,0:15:04.485 and their rights.
0:14:26.585,0:14:29.565 But on the other hand I'm not sure I personally	0:15:04.945,0:15:07.395 And so we see when there's discussion of freedom
0:14:29.565,0:14:32.445 like the term 'religious freedom' because	0:15:07.395,0:15:10.405 or even of equality
0:14:32.445,0:14:35.455 I do think the accent is on religion, and freedom,	0:15:10.405,0:15:12.845 it's usually framed within a sort of
0:14:35.455,0:14:38.485 and it should be more .. I think as secularists	0:15:12.845,0:15:15.865 religious framework so you know
0:14:38.485,0:14:41.495 we should be using the term 'freedom of conscience' more	0:15:15.865,0:15:18.825 there's equality for faith schools for example;
0:14:41.495,0:14:44.985 because that is an all-encompassing term.	0:15:18.825,0:15:21.795 if there's X number of Church of England schools for example
0:14:45.105,0:14:48.275	0:15:21.795,0:15:23.355 then there should be X number of Islamic schools.
	0:15:24.085,0:15:26.845

Or if there's a ??

0:15:26.845,0:15:29.725  
then there should be sharia courts.

0:15:29.725,0:15:32.765  
And what we see is, you know, this concept

0:15:32.765,0:15:35.905  
of equality and rights which are usually raised

0:15:35.905,0:15:38.985  
vis-a-vis individuals very often being raised

0:15:39.205,0:15:40.495  
with regards to religion, and I think that's

0:15:40.995,0:15:43.955  
a huge mistake. It's part of that movement

0:15:43.955,0:15:47.065  
of identity politics and sort of

0:15:47.065,0:15:50.075  
multiculturalism as a public policy that's

0:15:50.075,0:15:53.075  
regressive and that has taken away

0:15:53.075,0:15:55.995  
rights and citizenship

0:15:56.675,0:15:59.575  
from individuals and

0:15:59.575,0:16:02.845  
given it to the group and to

0:16:03.365,0:16:06.355  
religions and cultures.

0:16:06.355,0:16:09.345  
And that's why I think maybe 'freedom of  
conscience'

0:16:09.345,0:16:12.540  
or of 'expression' is something we should be  
using -

0:16:12.700,0:16:15.080  
Human rights language really that is all-  
encompassing

0:16:15.085,0:16:18.035  
and doesn't give any sort of privilege or  
priority to religion.

0:16:18.035,0:16:20.275  
AL: You have to see that

0:16:20.275,0:16:22.885  
with religious freedom or

0:16:22.885,0:16:26.045  
freedom of belief that the

0:16:26.045,0:16:28.705  
quote/unquote 'freedom' of a group to

0:16:28.705,0:16:31.875  
impose or to do what they want to do

0:16:31.875,0:16:34.805  
conflicting with the freedom of an individual,

0:16:34.805,0:16:37.765  
and that individual's right to be free from the  
religion,

0:16:37.765,0:16:40.685  
or the imposition of it

0:16:40.875,0:16:43.855  
MN: Yeah I mean the reality is, look there is  
no group

0:16:43.855,0:16:46.805  
and I think that's part of the problem.

0:16:46.805,0:16:49.565  
We've moved away from the concept of

0:16:49.565,0:16:52.455  
individual rights and citizenship,

0:16:52.455,0:16:53.455

universal rights, and  
0:16:53.575,0:16:55.915  
moved into something  
0:16:55.915,0:16:58.955  
where, you know, it's multi-faithism,  
0:16:58.955,0:17:01.455  
multiculturalism as a public policy  
0:17:01.455,0:17:04.465  
and sort of groups and communities that have  
rights  
0:17:04.465,0:17:07.385  
without any regard of what happens to  
0:17:07.385,0:17:08.435  
the individual.  
0:17:09.075,0:17:12.385  
The idea of group rights  
0:17:12.385,0:17:13.995  
gives the impression that there's homogeneity  
0:17:15.295,0:17:18.525  
that there is agreement within the so-called  
group or community  
0:17:18.525,0:17:21.285  
about issues and of course that's not the case.  
0:17:21.445,0:17:23.985  
Every group, no matter how  
0:17:23.985,0:17:25.749  
homogenous it is portrayed  
0:17:25.749,0:17:26.249  
0:17:26.249,0:17:26.925  
0:17:26.925,0:17:29.885  
there is huge amounts of dissent  
0:17:29.885,0:17:32.735  
and disagreement. Political movements  
0:17:32.735,0:17:33.735  
0:17:33.965,0:17:36.885  
social movements within, that really is  
0:17:36.885,0:17:39.935  
erased, and ignored and disregarded  
0:17:39.935,0:17:43.045  
when we look at communities as groups  
0:17:43.045,0:17:46.045  
and give rights to the group.  
0:17:46.045,0:17:48.605  
And basically when we do that  
0:17:48.605,0:17:51.935  
we are really giving rights to those in power  
0:17:51.935,0:17:55.035  
to decide what is appropriate and  
0:17:55.035,0:17:58.215  
not appropriate for the group in question  
0:17:58.215,0:18:01.205  
and so in a context where the religious right  
0:18:01.205,0:18:03.825  
has power and influence what we see is the  
0:18:03.825,0:18:05.605  
so-called Muslim community is then  
0:18:06.225,0:18:09.275  
you know, equated with the most  
0:18:09.275,0:18:12.475  
regressive amongst them - it's usually those in  
power -  
0:18:12.475,0:18:15.465

those who have access - you know, some sort of

0:18:15.965,0:18:19.175

links with the Islamist movement, we see that

0:18:19.175,0:18:22.095

very clearly now in the Islamic societies

0:18:22.095,0:18:25.115

in the sharia courts, in the Islamic organisations

0:18:25.115,0:18:26.635

there are many

0:18:28.005,0:18:30.965

many links with Islamic states

0:18:30.965,0:18:33.865

and movements and yet they are often

0:18:33.865,0:18:37.085

portrayed as representatives of the Muslim community.

0:18:37.155,0:18:40.575

Whereas of course the so-called Muslim community

0:18:40.705,0:18:43.775

has as many socialists and feminists and secularists

0:18:43.775,0:18:45.665

and free-thinkers as any other

0:18:46.245,0:18:48.365

group of people,

0:18:48.895,0:18:51.855

and by looking at the so-called freedom of

0:18:51.855,0:18:58.055

a group we're really denying individual rights, we're censoring

0:18:58.055,0:18:59.055

and suppressing dissent

0:18:59.165,0:19:02.405

and not allowing for

0:19:03.195,0:19:05.825

real solidarity to take place.

0:19:05.825,0:19:08.875

Because if you only see a homogenous community and

0:19:08.875,0:19:11.715

you don't see the dissent then, you know, you have

0:19:11.715,0:19:14.405

so-called progressives

0:19:14.405,0:19:17.545

showing their solidarity with the

0:19:17.545,0:19:20.925

so-called Muslim community by siding with the Islamists

0:19:20.925,0:19:23.995

because that's what happens when you see only

0:19:23.995,0:19:25.425

a homogenous group and not

0:19:26.335,0:19:28.535

the protests and dissents taking place within.

0:19:29.095,0:19:32.375

AL: Religious authoritarianism and this

0:19:32.375,0:19:35.705

effort to redefine religious freedom

0:19:35.705,0:19:38.405

is a very international movement.

0:19:38.405,0:19:41.685

I mean, the Hindutva, Christian rights,

0:19:41.705,0:19:44.775

Islamist rights in this country

0:19:44.775,0:19:47.445

- very international links -

0:19:47.445,0:19:50.565

do you think the people who are defending

0:19:50.565,0:19:52.595

what we might see as genuine

0:19:52.595,0:19:55.645

religious freedom or freedom of conscience,

0:19:55.645,0:19:58.735

do they need more of an international focus  
as well?

0:19:58.735,0:20:01.345

Or are the issues we're dealing with country-  
specific?

0:20:01.625,0:20:04.525

I think that, of course it's

0:20:04.525,0:20:07.045

an international movement.

0:20:07.045,0:20:10.205

I think in the same way that the

0:20:10.205,0:20:13.515

religious right - the fundamentalists - they see  
their

0:20:13.975,0:20:16.915

their links with each other.

0:20:16.915,0:20:19.395

They know that if one is strengthened it  
strengthens the others.

0:20:19.715,0:20:22.435

Because they belong to the same movement.

0:20:22.435,0:20:25.765

And likewise any gain made

0:20:25.765,0:20:28.825

for secularists in any country

0:20:28.825,0:20:31.685

is a gain for all of us and I think

0:20:32.945,0:20:35.335

there is a lot of work being done  
internationally.

0:20:35.335,0:20:38.325

There's a lot of linkages.

0:20:38.325,0:20:41.705

I mean if you talk about any situation here  
Britain

0:20:41.895,0:20:44.575

where you're working and campaigning for

0:20:44.575,0:20:46.745

secularism whether it be an end

0:20:46.745,0:20:49.715

to gender segregation at universities;

0:20:49.715,0:20:52.605

whether it be an end to

0:20:52.605,0:20:55.735

Sharia courts or the beth din or religious  
courts

0:20:55.735,0:20:58.995

or whether it be, you know, girls

0:20:58.995,0:21:02.005

at Islamic schools eating after boys

0:21:02.005,0:21:04.955

or being told to sit

0:21:04.955,0:21:07.935

on opposite sides of the classroom;

0:21:07.935,0:21:10.725

being taught that they're less than boys.

0:21:10.725,0:21:13.605  
Having to wear the veil which in my opinion

0:21:13.605,0:21:16.175  
is a form of child abuse. You know, if you

0:21:16.175,0:21:18.720  
look at any of those situations you will find  
those same

0:21:18.965,0:21:22.085  
battles taking place, in Iran, in Afghanistan,

0:21:22.085,0:21:24.745  
in Iraq, in Pakistan, you know

0:21:24.745,0:21:27.115  
there are huge links. And of course

0:21:28.205,0:21:29.325  
similarly in countries where

0:21:29.855,0:21:32.835  
there are Hindutva in India, you know,

0:21:32.835,0:21:35.865  
very similar issues relating

0:21:35.865,0:21:38.165  
women's rights, women's equality,

0:21:38.165,0:21:40.975  
women's subservience

0:21:40.975,0:21:43.895  
under religious rules; with regards

0:21:43.895,0:21:46.685  
to Christian rights in Poland for example.

0:21:46.685,0:21:49.525  
I think there are huge amounts of links and  
the reality is that

0:21:49.525,0:21:52.825  
we are - we secularists - we are working  
internationally.

0:21:53.045,0:21:56.135  
Unfortunately because there is such

0:21:56.135,0:21:57.385  
such, you know

0:21:57.885,0:22:00.815  
such respect for and tolerance for

0:22:00.815,0:22:04.045  
cultural relativism and this idea

0:22:04.625,0:22:07.645  
of identity politics and

0:22:07.645,0:22:10.585  
multiculturalism as a social policy,

0:22:10.585,0:22:11.735  
what we see is

0:22:12.605,0:22:15.605  
that solidarity is

0:22:15.605,0:22:18.725  
lacking in many segments of society

0:22:18.725,0:22:21.485  
and that's something that we need to

0:22:21.485,0:22:24.465  
work on a lot more. We need to

0:22:24.465,0:22:27.255  
be very clear that secularism is a universal ?

0:22:27.255,0:22:30.305  
I think many secularists apologise for  
secularism.

0:22:30.305,0:22:33.495  
They somehow feel like they need to

0:22:33.495,0:22:36.405  
explain how good it is for everyone else

0:22:36.535,0:22:39.565



without really having the confidence to

0:22:39.565,0:22:42.525

defend it in the way that it should be defended:

0:22:42.525,0:22:46.015

unequivocally, shamelessly. And, you know

0:22:46.075,0:22:49.355

we can do that even better if we actually see

0:22:49.355,0:22:51.875

how much people are risking

0:22:51.915,0:22:57.155

for secular movements across the world. I mean, you know,

0:22:57.155,0:23:00.225

if you look at the protest movements in Iran against compulsory veiling

0:23:00.225,0:23:03.025

against segregation in sports stadium, you know

0:23:03.025,0:23:05.525

they might not say that they are secular movements

0:23:05.525,0:23:08.345

but they are fundamentally secular movements,

0:23:08.345,0:23:11.245

modern movements, movements that are framed

0:23:11.245,0:23:14.335

within a universal rights perspective rather than

0:23:14.335,0:23:16.895

within a Sharia law perspective.

0:23:16.895,0:23:19.995

And so, you know, the more we see that

0:23:19.995,0:23:23.245

the more we recognise that, the more we work with

0:23:23.525,0:23:26.535

others fighting for secularism I think

0:23:26.535,0:23:29.455

the more secularists here will realise

0:23:29.455,0:23:32.295

how universal secularism is.

0:23:32.295,0:23:35.345

It really is a human right, it really is

0:23:35.765,0:23:38.875

a precondition and a prerequisite for

0:23:38.875,0:23:41.985

basic freedoms and equality

0:23:42.425,0:23:45.455

in any society.

0:23:45.455,0:23:48.445

AL: So then what can ordinary people do to

0:23:48.445,0:23:51.555

protect genuine freedom of and from religion?

0:23:52.155,0:23:55.185

MN: Well I think, I mean, there's a lot one can do.

0:23:55.185,0:23:56.865

But I think, you know,

0:23:56.865,0:23:59.855

if we start with basics - you know it is

0:23:59.855,0:24:02.375

this idea of insisting on universal rights

0:24:02.375,0:24:04.955

and values, you know

0:24:04.955,0:24:08.145  
people bleed the same way no matter

0:24:08.455,0:24:08.955  
what their background

0:24:08.955,0:24:11.605  
and they want to live with rights and freedoms

0:24:11.605,0:24:14.895  
no matter what their background.

0:24:14.995,0:24:18.045  
And you know sort of insisting on this universalism,

0:24:18.045,0:24:20.885  
and insisting on people being citizens

0:24:20.885,0:24:23.845  
irrespective of what so-called community they belong to

0:24:23.845,0:24:26.965  
and I think if we look at it from that perspective

0:24:26.965,0:24:29.945  
then we can see why it's important

0:24:29.945,0:24:32.895  
for women even if they come from

0:24:32.895,0:24:35.825  
Muslim backgrounds, to have access to

0:24:35.825,0:24:38.645  
their full rights and not just be relegated to

0:24:38.645,0:24:41.335  
Sharia courts for example.

0:24:41.335,0:24:44.395  
And to see it as something that is a duty

0:24:44.395,0:24:47.315

in any society to give citizens

0:24:47.315,0:24:49.315  
irrespective of their backgrounds,

0:24:49.315,0:24:52.135  
and any pressures that they might be

0:24:53.025,0:24:54.695  
facing to have the

0:24:55.015,0:24:57.755  
rights and freedoms that

0:24:57.755,0:25:00.705  
are available to all citizens, you know.

0:25:00.705,0:25:03.505  
And the other aspect of course is

0:25:03.505,0:25:06.645  
an insistence on freedom of expression.

0:25:06.645,0:25:09.615  
Freedom of expression is really one of the

0:25:09.615,0:25:12.865  
only tools that ordinary people have to oppose

0:25:12.865,0:25:15.955  
those in power who are trying to suppress;

0:25:15.955,0:25:18.575  
and to challenge authoritarianism

0:25:18.575,0:25:21.575  
and inequality, and if

0:25:21.575,0:25:24.615  
freedom of expression is constantly

0:25:24.615,0:25:27.385  
limited and restricted with, you know:

0:25:27.385,0:25:30.415  
yes I believe in freedom of expression but

0:25:30.415,0:25:32.905  
not if you offend, not if you are

0:25:32.905,0:25:35.995  
you know, insulting x, y and z;

0:25:35.995,0:25:39.205  
not if you are going too far,

0:25:39.205,0:25:41.875  
not if you are provocative.

0:25:41.875,0:25:44.905  
There's always these ifs and buts. Well it gives  
- I think it encourages t

0:25:44.905,0:25:50.815  
the religious right which is why they really can  
to do anything they want.

0:25:50.815,0:25:53.725  
They can ban people from trying to speak.

0:25:53.725,0:25:56.695  
They can threaten people for

0:25:56.695,0:25:59.265  
speaking their mind. And what's happened

0:25:59.265,0:26:02.615  
is that those who bully the loudest,

0:26:02.765,0:26:05.815  
those who can frighten the most - they're the  
ones

0:26:05.815,0:26:08.885  
who are able to have full

0:26:08.885,0:26:12.005  
rights in a way while the rest of us don't.

0:26:12.005,0:26:15.015  
And I think this insistence on really

0:26:15.015,0:26:18.125  
the sort of universal principles,

0:26:18.125,0:26:20.685  
and also an insistence on free expression -

0:26:20.705,0:26:23.915  
as long as there's no incitement to violence,  
you know

0:26:23.915,0:26:26.785  
I think it's hugely important if we're going to

0:26:26.785,0:26:29.585  
be able to win this very important battle

0:26:29.585,0:26:32.135  
that faces not just our society

0:26:32.135,0:26:35.235  
but many societies across the globe.

0:26:35.885,0:26:38.745  
AL: That brings us on to - you're speaking

0:26:39.055,0:26:42.145  
on 14 February at the 'Why we defended  
Rushdie'

0:26:42.145,0:26:45.235  
event at Conway Hall.

0:26:45.235,0:26:47.535  
Do you want to tell us a little bit about that?

0:26:47.535,0:26:50.935  
MN: The event on why we defended Rushdie

0:26:51.025,0:26:53.765  
is to mark the 40th anniversary of

0:26:53.765,0:26:57.085  
the death fatwah against Salman Rushdie.

0:26:57.155,0:27:00.085  
And again, Salman Rushdie wrote a book,  
there's

0:27:00.085,0:27:03.125  
a lot of evidence that there were Islamists

0:27:03.125,0:27:05.525  
from Britain that actually went and asked

0:27:05.835,0:27:07.905  
Khomeini - Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran -

0:27:07.905,0:27:10.755  
to issue the fatwah. And so there is,

0:27:10.755,0:27:13.515  
you know, again when we talk about things  
having an

0:27:13.515,0:27:16.605  
international links here's one very clear one

0:27:17.935,0:27:20.965  
where this fatwah then had huge

0:27:20.965,0:27:21.955

0:27:21.955,0:27:24.925  
repercussions on the right to

0:27:24.925,0:27:27.955  
criticise and mock religion, not just

0:27:27.955,0:27:31.245  
in Britain but of course across the globe.

0:27:31.245,0:27:33.365  
You know, 40 years ago were were

0:27:33.365,0:27:36.515  
more free to say what we wanted to than we  
are today.

0:27:36.515,0:27:39.725  
And you know you've even got Life of Brian

0:27:39.725,0:27:40.655

0:27:40.655,0:27:43.945  
actors - Monty Python - saying that

0:27:43.945,0:27:46.965

they most probably wouldn't be able to make  
a Life of Brian

0:27:46.965,0:27:49.985  
today given the climate that we're in.

0:27:49.985,0:27:52.945  
And so, you know, it was hugely important

0:27:52.945,0:27:55.985  
and brave for woman against

0:27:55.985,0:27:59.055  
fundamentalism, Southall Black Sisters,

0:27:59.055,0:28:01.285  
women like Pragna Patel

0:28:01.285,0:28:04.425  
and Gita Sahgal who went and

0:28:04.495,0:28:07.405  
stood in support of Salman Rushdie

0:28:07.545,0:28:10.395  
and face, you know, thousands upon  
thousands

0:28:10.395,0:28:12.985  
of Islamists who were calling for his death.

0:28:13.295,0:28:16.045  
But the world also comprises of people who

0:28:16.045,0:28:18.585  
would like to read Salman Rushdie's book

0:28:19.025,0:28:22.035  
and who would like to write books without

0:28:22.035,0:28:24.935  
fearing for their lives, you know.

0:28:24.935,0:28:27.475  
And I think even at the time and even today

0:28:27.475,0:28:29.605  
what we see is constant victim-blaming.

0:28:29.975,0:28:32.925

You know - oh, Salman Rushdie's costing the state too much money

0:28:32.925,0:28:36.175

when he was being protected in the early years.

0:28:36.175,0:28:39.105

Or Charlie Hebdo - well, if they hadn't done those cartoons

0:28:39.105,0:28:42.165

they could be alive today.

0:28:42.165,0:28:45.305

You know, blaming those who've merely spoken their mind.

0:28:45.305,0:28:47.955

And you know we should really be

0:28:47.955,0:28:51.005

targeting the religious right,

0:28:51.005,0:28:53.755

they are destroying rights in of course

0:28:54.175,0:28:57.045

many, many countries across

0:28:57.045,0:29:00.055

the world and we have a responsibility

0:29:00.055,0:29:03.055

to defend those rights, to insist on them,

0:29:03.055,0:29:05.915

and to defend those who are under attack.

0:29:05.915,0:29:08.445

And of course Salman Rushdie is the greatest case in point.

0:29:08.445,0:29:11.435

His story really was linked with

0:29:11.435,0:29:14.415

the rise of the Islamist right

0:29:14.415,0:29:16.965

in the world, and we see a very different

0:29:16.965,0:29:20.025

world today for women, for gay people,

0:29:20.025,0:29:22.845

for free-thinkers across the world.

0:29:22.845,0:29:26.055

And so standing up for the right

0:29:26.055,0:29:28.515

to express oneself is really a key fight

0:29:28.515,0:29:31.335

in the fight for a secular world.

0:29:31.335,0:29:34.375

0:29:34.375,0:29:37.455

AL: That leads us on quite nicely because we always like to

0:29:37.455,0:29:40.105

ask our guests for some recommendations.

0:29:40.455,0:29:43.055

Are there any books or films that you think

0:29:43.055,0:29:45.675

do a particularly good job of exploring

0:29:45.675,0:29:48.715

freedom of conscience that you'd like to share?

0:29:48.715,0:29:51.765

MN: Well I guess I'll give a plug for the Council of ex-Muslims

0:29:51.765,0:29:54.705

and a film that was made two years ago

0:29:54.705,0:29:57.615

by Deeyah Khan, she's a Muslim woman herself

0:29:58.215,0:30:01.065

a really wonderful award-winning film-maker

0:30:02.865,0:30:05.875

who's done several impressive films.

0:30:06.095,0:30:08.995

She did one on the Council of ex-Muslims

0:30:08.995,0:30:11.395

and Islam's non-believers and I think

0:30:11.395,0:30:14.365

it's a hugely important film.

0:30:14.365,0:30:17.185

Unfortunately it never got the coverage

0:30:17.265,0:30:20.335

that her other films got, and of course it's because

0:30:20.335,0:30:23.445

again, this idea of leaving Islam, and

0:30:23.445,0:30:26.395

how dare we do it publicly and vocally.

0:30:26.635,0:30:29.685

This idea that, you know, how dare we criticise

0:30:29.685,0:30:32.425

Islam publicly and vocally.

0:30:32.435,0:30:35.415

That it's impermissible, it's taboo, it's not allowed

0:30:35.415,0:30:38.125

can clearly be seen even in

0:30:38.125,0:30:41.145

the reception of the film. So for example

0:30:41.785,0:30:44.375

the Guardian did a piece on Deeyah Khan's work,

0:30:44.375,0:30:47.355

it mentioned that she's done for films,

0:30:47.355,0:30:50.355

it listed three of her films and of course

0:30:50.355,0:30:53.465

the only one that wasn't listed was

0:30:53.465,0:30:55.835

the one on Islam's non-believers.

0:30:56.285,0:30:58.885

I would really recommend to anyone who's

0:30:58.885,0:31:01.475

grappling with these issues to watch it if they can.

0:31:01.475,0:31:04.525

It can be accessed via our website,

0:31:04.525,0:31:07.395

the Council of ex-Muslims of Britain website,

0:31:07.395,0:31:08.925

if you do a search on it

0:31:09.275,0:31:12.015

there's a link and it's also of course on YouTube.

0:31:12.200,0:31:15.025

AL: Maryam, thanks so much for joining us

0:31:15.025,0:31:18.140

and for your time, and we'll have links to the Rushdie event

0:31:18.140,0:31:21.025

and the film which you mentioned in the show notes.

0:31:21.025,0:31:24.125

MN: Oh that's wonderful. Thank you so much for giving me

0:31:24.125,0:31:26.885  
this chance as well and good luck with the rest of your podcasts.

0:31:31.495,0:31:34.565  
AL: Thanks again to Maryam for joining us, and thanks

0:31:34.565,0:31:37.135  
to everyone for their feedback on the first two episodes:

0:31:37.135,0:31:39.925  
those were my interviews with Stephen Evans and Rachel Nazer

0:31:40.425,0:31:43.375  
You can catch up with all our podcasts at

0:31:43.375,0:31:46.355  
[secularism.org.uk/podcasts](http://secularism.org.uk/podcasts)

0:31:46.355,0:31:49.375  
This series has been leading up to our major conference in May,

0:31:49.375,0:31:52.765  
Secularism 2019: Reclaiming Religious Freedom

0:31:52.835,0:31:53.845  
The details are linked

0:31:53.845,0:31:56.795  
in the show notes and tickets are available for just £50

0:31:56.795,0:31:59.735  
or just half-price for NSS members.

0:31:59.735,0:32:02.715  
The National Secular Society works for the

0:32:02.715,0:32:05.695

separation of religion and state, and equal respects for everyone's human rights,

0:32:05.695,0:32:08.225  
so that no-one is either advantaged or disadvantaged

0:32:08.225,0:32:10.895  
on account of their beliefs.

0:32:10.895,0:32:13.655  
If you enjoyed this episode please consider joining the NSS today.

0:32:13.655,0:32:16.485  
Until next time, I am Alastair Lichten. Thank you for tuning in.

0:32:16.485,0:32:18.305  
Goodbye.