

## One Law for All

# Rally to defend freedom of expression

Speech by Keith Porteous Wood, Executive Director of the National Secular Society.

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This oppression of freedom of expression by Islamists in universities, even in this country, is – sadly – nothing new. I remember being shouted down on a discussion about gay rights in the 1980s at Brunel University in Uxbridge. I was less shocked by the attempt to silence me, than by the completely supine attitude of the students and the organisers of the acceptance this behaviour is normal - and by implication acceptable. Beyond an apology for the rudeness disruption, no further action was taken. I expect that part of the reason for this was that the perpetrators were from an ethnic minority. That dangerous conflating race and religion is even more a problem now.

For those of you who like solving simultaneous equations, or are logicians, I have a little exercise.

If criticising Islam = Islamophobia, and Islamophobia = racist (as we are told), and racism = unacceptable (as we agree), is therefore criticising Islam unacceptable?

That is the very dodgy algebra or manipulative logic that some of the less thinking members of our academic community seem to have swallowed whole. And the implications of them having done so are immensely dangerous.

I'm very much struck by writer Kenan Malik's opinion that "The trouble with Islamophobia is that it is an irrational concept. It confuses hatred of, and discrimination against, Muslims on the one hand with criticism of Islam on the other. The charge of 'Islamophobia' is all too often used not to highlight racism but to stifle criticism. And in reality discrimination against Muslims is not as great as is often perceived - but criticism of Islam should be greater. All too often Islamophobia is used as an excuse in a way to kind of blackmail society."<sup>1</sup>

It should be a matter of great concern to us all that some of the most important issues central to the future of our society are passing us by, almost undiscussed - and society is being changed in important, sometimes disturbing, ways without our active involvement, far less agreement.

"Sensitive" issues, such as sharia, are regarded as off-limits by most politicians, rarely covered objectively in the press. Disgracefully, in the place that should be the most free of all, the United Nations, it has been ruled at the Human Rights Council that sharia can only be discussed by experts, i.e. those who are Muslim and are pretty well certain not to criticise it in any way,

And if such regulations or self-censorship do not drive such subjects underground, then - as we have now observed in Queen Mary University - intimidation and violence do the job. And I'm yet to be convinced that the police and CPS even trying to find the perpetrator, despite (we understand) him being known on campus.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.kenanmalik.com/essays/prospect\\_islamophobia.html](http://www.kenanmalik.com/essays/prospect_islamophobia.html)

We seem to have got into the dreadful situation where it is “heads they win” and “tails we lose”. While sensible debate becomes almost impossible, clerics in particular have been able to get away with inflammatory speech while the police and the CPS go out of their way to ignore it.

When, for example, the police visited Channel 4’s “undercover Mosque” unit filmed hate speech at the notorious Green Lane Birmingham mosque in 2007, the filmmakers naïvely assumed that it was to seek evidence of wrongdoing there. But on the contrary, it was an attempt to prosecute these brave programme makers determined to expose the hate speech to which the police were so indifferent. Only after a huge furore did the police and CPS unconditionally apologise and pay compensation to the programme makers. It took me until 2009 to obtain an acknowledgement by the Attorney General in the House of Lords that significant mistakes had been made. Shocking those the foregoing is, what is far worse is that they are symptomatic of justice culture which, to put it at its most charitable, is not applying the same standards of justice evenly over all sectors of the community.

Of course, freedom of expression is not absolute: there are legal and safety considerations. Incitement to violence is - or should be - a very clear line in the sand. But the authorities also need to bear in mind that suppression risks creating martyrs and drives dangerous ideas underground where they are not exposed to debate.

Freedom of expression is the bedrock of our civilisation and our democracy. Freedom only to express that which is “responsible” i.e. will not upset anyone, is no freedom at all. In such a diverse society as our own, there is hardly anything that can be said will not offend someone. It follows that there must not - there simply cannot - be a right not to be offended. And the way to deal with expressions which some people find offensive is for them to argue their corner in debate. Suppressing such exchanges allows dangerous ideas to go unchallenged.

Those who are responsible for academe should reflect on the paucity of their leadership over recent decades in respect of freedom of expression, and realise that bowing and scraping to every complaint of offence has seriously undermined our basic liberties.

It is particularly important in academe for there to be freedom of expression. In the interests of wider society, hotheads should be exposed to their opponents in intellectual discourse. And we are in increasing danger of graduates emerging from university with a starred first in intimidation.

I plead with both students and staff to stop tolerating intolerance, to put freedom of expression first, and to have the courage to stand up and protect it at all costs.

(A shorter version of this speech was delivered, due to time constraints.)