

On Censoring of Ted Talk

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Do I or do I not have the right to tell my story?

This is the question I asked at my 2020 talk on [Creativity in Protesting Islamic Fundamentalism](#) at TedX Warwick's [Creativity within Crisis](#) event. Ironically, my talk on the censorship of ex-Muslims was itself censored by TedX, first by its refusal to publish the talk due to 'political content' and then by publishing after public pressure but without any slides – and the addition of a trigger warning: 'Some viewers may find elements of this talk to be distressing or objectionable.'

Of course, none of this is new.

I have had Islamic Society students at [Goldsmiths University](#) try to cancel my talk and I've been barred from speaking at [Warwick University](#), a decision that was overturned but nonetheless defended by the likes of [The Guardian](#).

I have faced character assassinations, social media censorship, been threatened with death more times than I care to remember, including once via a pre-recorded threat from the intelligence services of the Islamic regime in Iran.

The Iranian regime has called me [immoral, corrupt, a harlot](#).



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Many have labelled me inflammatory, offensive, 'Islamophobic' – even though criticism of religion (which is just an idea and a bad one at that) and religious fundamentalism (a far-right political movement) is not bigotry against believers.

Certainly, creativity in protest against Islamic fundamentalism and religious morality can offend – not necessarily intentionally – but it may offend because it pushes boundaries and clashes with dominant perceptions and narratives.

It offends because it challenges the limits of permissibility for people like me. You can live as you choose, no questions asked, but for the 'other' – for minorities, migrants, those of us from Muslim families and societies under Islamic law – we are expected to live within the confines of predefined rules set by mullahs, fascists and fundamentalists.

But let me ask you a simple question.

Do Islam's non-believers, the kafirs, the ex-Muslims, the unveiled women, the harlots... not have the right to also speak and live and love in any way we choose?

Granted, what I say is for some uncomfortable to hear – and to be honest, often uncomfortable for me to say.

But what else can I do to say I exist? That we exist? That we are not property. That we are not extensions of family or imagined homogenous communities or societies. I say 'imagined' because not everyone in any so-called 'community' or society thinks alike. Don't forget we are individuals with rights and hopes and dreams.

If we do not speak, who will speak for us? If we do not speak, how else can we move from invisibility to visibility, from absence to presence, from exclusion to inclusion, from isolation to participation, from trauma and shunning to survival, from discrimination to equality? Yet it's our words – even when they're written on our own bodies – that are more offensive than violence, death threats and murder.

[Apostasy/blasphemy are punishable by death](#) in a dozen countries under Islamic rules. These laws persecute countless people like Raif Badawi, sentenced to 10 years in prison and 1000 lashes for freethought in Saudi Arabia, or Sohail Arabi in Iran on blasphemy charges, or Junaid Hafeez and Ayaz Nizami in Pakistan currently languishing on death row for blasphemy.

Women who transgress religious rules face severe consequences, especially when women are seen to personify male, national and religious honour and pride. In Iran, three women have been [sentenced to over 40 years in prison](#) between them, including for 'inciting prostitution' merely for transgressing compulsory veiling rules.

And it isn't just taking place 'over there'. Those living in Britain and the west can face honour-based violence and [shunning](#) – a type of long-term psychological torture and social death penalty – for leaving Islam, being gay or unveiling.

When you are systematically silenced and erased in this way, often with violence or the threat of it, the mere act of speaking with creativity is an important act of survival as well as civil disobedience and resistance.

When the public space is so oppressively full of fear, to be subverting, flouting and disobeying absurd and inhuman rules not only challenges dogmas and taboos – it reclaims and transforms the public space and society.

That is not to say that racism, xenophobia and anti-Muslim bigotry don't exist. Of course, they do. But you cannot excuse fundamentalism because of racism any more than you can excuse racism because of fundamentalism. Creativity in protest challenges bigotry by appealing to our common humanity. It responds to violence with humour and nonviolence. Creativity diminishes fear and feelings of despair and increases democratic and participatory politics. It brings hope and courage.

Hope and courage come from protests like the [#ExMuslimBecause](#) hashtag, which went viral in 2015 when countless individuals shared why they had left Islam and become non-believers. This came to more than 120,000 tweets from 65 countries, which were also met with solidarity from some Muslims.

We find courage with [fast-defying actions](#) during Ramadan – 'eat-ins' in front of embassies of countries that persecute people for eating and drinking during Ramadan.

Or actions in solidarity with the movement in Iran against compulsory veiling.

Or [nude protests](#) that insist there is nothing wrong with women's bodies and our bodies can become tools for our liberation.

Or acts like the [Atheist Azaan](#) – subverting the call to prayers – to normalise dissent and heresy.

Or [dancing in Kings Cross](#) for acceptance of ex-Muslims and an end to shunning.

Or creativity in defence of rights of LGBT Muslims and ex-Muslims at [Gay Pride](#). [Why can you say Jesus is Gay but not Allah is Gay?](#)

Creativity in protest insists on the human rights of freedom of conscience (which includes freedom not to believe) and freedom of expression (which includes the right to criticise and mock the sacred and taboo), and it does so in practice and not as theoretical or abstract concepts and notions.

It creates solidarity and insists on equality, not superiority or difference. Creativity in protest goes to the core of what it is to be fully human and enables us to reimagine society and the world and to change it for the better.

Creativity in protest says to the fundamentalists: you do not have power over us. You cannot silence us. We will not submit. We will determine our own stories.

As [Southall Black Sisters](#) says: our tradition – struggle not submission.

* For more information on TedX censorship, see [Rationality Rules: TedX's De Facto Blasphemy Law](#).

Maryam Namazie is an Iranian-born writer and activist living in the UK. She is the Spokesperson of [One Law for All](#) and the [Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain](#). Until recently, she hosted a weekly television programme broadcast in Iran in Persian and English called [Bread and Roses](#). During decades of activism work, Maryam has executive produced [Women Leaving Islam](#) and published [The Woman's Quran](#). She has organised [Apostasy Day](#) and [Atheist Day](#), the [largest gatherings of ex-Muslims in history](#), including at [De Balie's Celebrating Dissent](#); led a topless protests at [Pride London](#) in defence of LGBT rights; took part in a [nude protest in defence of women's rights in the Middle East and North](#)

[Africa](#). She has initiated an [International Day to Defend Amina](#) and the [Nude Photo Revolutionary Calendar 2012-2013](#), founded [Iran Solidarity](#), and helped launch the [Manifesto for a Free and Secular Middle East and North Africa](#). In 2006, Maryam signed a statement of [12 writers against Islamic totalitarianism](#) with Salman Rushdie, Taslima Nasrin and others. She has also fought against [stoning laws](#) and defended [refugee rights](#), amongst others.

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