

Extend interview of Maryam Namazie, Iranian-born secularist and human rights activist

Wednesday 12 October 2016, by [JACOBSEN Scott Douglas](#), [NAMAZIE Maryam](#) (Date first published: 12 October 2016).

Maryam Namazie is an Iranian-born secularist and human rights activist, commentator and broadcaster. She is spokesperson for Iran Solidarity, One Law for All and the Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen - How did you get involved in activism?

Maryam Namazie - I became an activist as a result of my own life experiences after an Islamic regime took power in Iran. We fled the country. One of the first ways in which I got politically involved was in doing refugee rights work. My family and so many we knew had become refugees and it was a way of dealing with the trauma of losing everything and starting all over again - somewhere completely new - and at times unwelcoming.

It followed too, that I would be active against theocracy and religious rules, and for people's rights. The best way you can fight repression is to refuse and resist. I didn't set out to be an activist; in many ways I was forced into it. I had no choice but to fight back in the best way I knew how. Also when you are faced with such inhumanity - like the Islamic regime of Iran - the best fight back has to be fundamentally human.

Was there support from parents, siblings, or others for you?

My family has always been supportive of me. That's why it has been easy for me to be an activist. Also, my partner is an activist. I've really always had a lot of support.

I can't imagine people who not only don't have the support of their families, but are being beaten and abused because of their beliefs. I think it makes it so much more difficult. Doesn't it? It still astonishes me people like that can still be active and speak out.

I have met a lot of very vocal women. Many of them say they've had supportive parents and fathers. I think that's key when you're an activist. Obviously, you can be vocal without family support, but it helps a great deal.

Speaking of human rights as well as women rights, which are somewhat separated but definitely overlap, do you note that more of the rights violations are women's in general?

Obviously, I think rights are violated across the board, but because women are seen to be more

vulnerable, they are seen to be the property of the community, the society, the family's honor, the society's national honour, it makes it easier to target them. And often the abuse is legitimised in ways that other abuses aren't.

As a result, violence against women is more acceptable in many ways. In that sense, one of the greatest violations of human rights is in the area of women's rights.

Some of the more tragic and dramatic examples are violations of women's bodies through things such as tens of millions of women having female genital mutilation, infibulation, clitoridectomy, and so on, against their will, even as girls. Does that seem, along with others, more religiously motivated or not?

I think there are obviously non-religious motivations for those violations, but very often religion also justifies and legitimises it, and gives it divine sanction in ways that other justifications don't - which makes it all the more dangerous.

You are working on a new film. What is the content and purpose of that film?

The film is on Islam's non-believers. It's been made by Deeyah Khan, who is an award-winning film maker. Her previous films have been about honor killing as well as Jihadis.

And this one is about Islam's non-believers. It looks at the situation of young people, particularly in Britain, who are facing discrimination and abuse because they've decided to be atheists. Often, including from their families and the larger communities that they live in. The film also links to the international situation.

You see the links between Bangladeshi Islamists hacking atheists to death in Bangladesh and also threatening atheists right here in Britain. People who are respected, people who are so-called 'community leaders'. It shows that Islamism is an international movement that targets apostates.

It also shows the ex-Muslim resistance as an international movement and how it too is an important way of pushing back the Islamists by opening up the space to question and debate, and criticise religion, even to renounce religion. The ability to do it despite the risks involved.

The American Massachusetts Institute of Technology trained and Tufts University based philosopher and cognitive scientist professor, Daniel Dennett, did something similar to that. He looked into pastors, ministers, and preachers who had lost their faith and continued to preach. There's a decent amount who've lost their faith and continued to preach. I haven't seen the precise results, but this seems like a similar case. A possibly relatively common phenomena of people putting on the 'face' such as the engaging in practices and wearing the clothing in public, but not holding the beliefs sincerely or simply not believing. Do you know of the numbers of non-believers in Islam, but are putting on that face - so to speak?

Yea, also, there are 13 countries that execute apostates and atheists. There's also a huge amount of threats and intimidation. The numbers are much larger than we can imagine because of the many risks involved. Social media and the internet are doing to Islam what the printing press did to Christianity.

So, it is opening the way to challenge it in a way that hasn't been possible because of the risks that are involved. My opinion is it's a tsunami of millions. It really is the case that there are atheists in every family, in every home, in every neighbourhood, in every country.

There are many of them. We can see it now via social media. What we see, though, is still the tip of the iceberg. We have many members living in Britain, which is a relatively safe place to live. There are no apostasy rules, but people continue to wear the veil, go to mosque, and continue to say they're Muslims when they are atheists.

I think if the pressure of the Islamist movement is removed, if that movement is pushed back in the way political Christianity was pushed back by an Enlightenment, the world will be surprised by the sheer number of non-believers. I think even we will be surprised by it.

On the fringe of that sector of people, that sub-population within the community will be those that simply had over time their fundamentalist beliefs softened and liberalised quite a bit. Do you think that would be a much larger population - that sector would then move into non-believing as well?

Definitely, I think that is the case. I mean, of course, no community or society is homogenous. There are so many differences of opinion. The problem is we live in an era where communities are homogenised.

Very often, those in power are seen to be the representatives of those communities. In the so-called Muslim community, Islamists are seen as the authentic Muslims and representatives. I think many people are forced to keep up appearances, even if they don't believe.

Time will reveal all, but already we're seeing the extent of it. If anyone is interested in seeing it, is interested in accepting that there's diversity and dissent in what is considered a homogenous group, it is very easy to see.

And it is on the increase. A convert was telling me that the Islamists always talk about how many people are converting into Islam, but we never hear about many of those converts who then decide to leave Islam and to become atheists.

We hear it is the fastest growing religion. We never hear about all of those people running for their lives in the opposite direction.

(Laugh)

Things are skewed in the favour of religion because religion is privileged anyway. No matter what society you live in. But when it is imposed, very often by brute force, by the Islamist movement, the numbers can never really be revealed.

But you can get a really good sense of it. When we started #ExMuslimBecause, we were expecting to have a couple of hundred people respond. We even thought, "Let's do it a few weeks in advance of December 10th, International Human Rights Day, so, we can build up on it and gather a few hundred statements."

It went viral in 24 hours. There were over 120,000 tweets from 65 different countries. Again, that is still the tip of the iceberg, really.

At this point in time, how do you self-identify in terms of irreligious/religious beliefs as well as socio-political beliefs?

I have a big problem with identity politics. I think it's regressive as it tries to pigeonhole people into groups of constructed identities. It refuses to acknowledge that people are multifaceted. They have so many different characteristics that define them or they define themselves with.

For me, even the whole ex-Muslim movement is not about identity politics, I know it is for some people, but it is about a political challenge to the Islamist movement, to discrimination and violence against apostates, and it is one way of highlighting that.

It also challenges the view that the “Muslim community” is a homogenous community. If you have ex-Muslims, millions of people who don’t want to be considered Muslim anymore, it challenges multiculturalism as a social policy. I personally have political positions and ideals, which, for me, mark who I stand with irrespective of background or belief.

I am a secularist, for example. I will stand with Muslims and ex-Muslims, and non-Muslims, in support of secularism. I might be an atheist, but I don’t necessarily agree with all atheists on all issues. I am pro-refugee rights and against profiling of Muslims, for example.

I am old-fashioned in the sense that I think we need to build solidarity around political ideals, rather than around ridiculous limiting identities, which narrow the allies we can have and put us amongst those who aren’t necessarily our allies because they fit within a narrow identity.

Unfortunately, this is old-fashioned, but that’s how political organising has always been done. It has been done irrespective of one’s background, beliefs, and identity around specific political ideals.

I think that’s why we’re in the mess we are in today because we are not able to see our allies and our enemies given the bogus identity politics.

I want to shift the conversation to some of the things you mentioned at the beginning about refugees. In the early 21st century, we have a singular tragedy with the Syrian refugee crisis. How do you think countries in Europe are managing and handling refugees as well as the crisis at large?

For me, the refugee issue is a human rights issue - in the same way that I don’t think you should stop people using a hospital because they are undocumented and an EU citizen rather than a British born citizen or exclude people based on age, sex, race, or belief, I don’t think you should stop people from gaining protection.

It doesn’t matter where you fled from and where you seek refuge, you must be granted protection. It’s a basic human right.

People who have never had to worry about getting visas or fleeing for their lives might find it hard to understand the desperation - to have to leave everything you know - the language, the society, your work, your family, your loved ones, sometimes even sending your children on their own (unaccompanied minors) because you have no other hope of saving them. You send them off on this perilous journey and don’t even know if they will make it alive.

From my perspective, we should do everything and anything we can to help people. In the same way, I think everyone who needs healthcare should have it. Everyone who needs housing should have it. I don’t understand why we should have homeless people. I don’t understand why there are children who go to bed hungry in this country. I also don’t understand why refugees shouldn’t be given protection and safety.

I know of course it is because profit is more important than human need, and differences amongst us are more deemed more important than our common humanity but I don’t see why it should be that way.

Also, rights are not contingent on whether you like or agree with those demanding it. Sometimes the

refugee issue is muddled up because people want to run an inquisition before deciding whether someone is eligible for this right. My perspective is that even if a person's views are disgusting and vile, they still have human rights. You can't stop people from accessing a GP because you don't like their beliefs, so why do you think you can do it when it comes to those trying to save their lives and fleeing wars and persecution? Also beliefs are not set in stone. They change all the time.

People have a right to an education. They have a right to food. They have a right to healthcare. I would also say they have a right to asylum. I know we're living in a time when this is unfashionable to say. With Brexit, so many hate anyone who doesn't look like them. They want everybody out. Even if they're doctors who are saving your life, they are still not good enough, not white enough, or what have you.

I think this boils down to a very fundamental issue. Rights are for everyone not just your pals. And there is more that hold us together than separate us if only we could see beyond the propaganda.

We are seeing some concerns from many people being raised both in North America, Europe, and elsewhere with, the phrase being used is, "right wing nationalism," which can sometimes be seen as ethnic nationalism in a way. What do you think is the state of that at this point in time? What are the possible major concerns associated with that?

I think this is what happens when identity politics rules.

Identity politics divides and separates people so that they can no longer see their commonalities across these false borders. It's not just that minorities love to live in ghettos and be humiliated day-in and day-out. This ghettoisation is part and parcel of government policies of multiculturalism and cultural relativism. It means that governments can manage their minorities on the cheap by outsourcing citizens to self-appointed community "leaders" and Sharia courts, Islamic schools and so on.

When identity politics is supreme, it makes it possible for white identity politics to be portrayed as a legitimate option.

It surprises me how many people justify and legitimise what is fundamentally white identity politics, white supremacist politics, because the fascists and bigots happen to be critical of Islam. Look, the Islamists are also critical of US militarism but that doesn't mean I should be siding with them. You can oppose both. This is a trap, though, the so-called "Regressive Left" fall into. But so do those who use the term "Regressive Left" in every other sentence but consider it a "smear" to call out those feeding into the far-Right narrative. Like the atheists and secularists who fall into the trap of defending Tommy Robinson and Robert Spencer because they have "some legitimate views." Well, I'm sure if you sit down and have a chat with al-Baghdadi, he will have "some legitimate views." Assad or Khamenei might too; they might think that roads should be paved.

But that's not a reason to ally with them or to justify their politics. I think this is a huge problem. You have people saying, "Well, the Far Right is dealing with the Islamists, therefore, let's deal with them with kid gloves." I think that's a mistake. If you look at them (I always get shit for saying this but people don't understand what I'm saying) fundamentally they are similar to the Islamists. Islamism is a far-Right movement.

Of course, I'm not saying Tommy Robinson decapitates people, but movements can be fundamentally similar yet based on the amount of power or access to power they have, they might not necessarily be able to wreck the same havoc as one that has state power and backing.

Fundamentally, though, their politics is one of hate, placing collective blame, regression. It's unfortunate that so many people who consider themselves freethinkers would side with them.

You mentioned Sharia courts as well as Islamic schools. I know this is a bit of an issue in the United Kingdom. For instance, private religious schools for youngsters, for kids. Kids are told things that at times are outright wrong, especially even facts and fundamental theories, principles, and laws about the natural world. For instance, creationism over evolutionary theory and so on. What are your own personal concerns with some of these institutions and the way they being implemented within the United Kingdom?

I think "faith schools" is an oxymoron. Schools and faith don't go together. Unless, you're talking about indoctrination. I know there are some Church of England schools that are not indoctrinating the way Islamic schools are. They used to do it and still they promote ideas that are antithetical to free thinking and education. I think, in a sense, the educational system is one of the only ways in which we can protect children from their families.

It is meant to be a way in which the playing field is levelled for all kids irrespective of background. You're rich. You're poor. Your family beats you. Your family tries to veil you. Schools should be a place where you're safeguarded.

You get to hear different ideas. You get the protection you might not get at home. You get to be equal to other kids. Faith schools are antithetical to this. If you question, you are punished. If you raise dissent or you don't agree, or you ask how certain religious edicts could possibly be true, you're penalised for it.

Education should promote and encourage questioning, inquiry, and free thought. It makes no sense to have religious schools. It's a prescription for disaster. We're faced with that disaster today. I can't understand how it's ever seen to be good idea.

Historically religion was in charge of education; faith schools are a remnant of the time when religion played a central role in the state and society. And of course even today, religion holds a privileged place in society. The British government, for example, is not a secular state by any means. This is a state in which the Church of England has real power. They've got bishops in the House of Lords. The Queen is the head of the church. You've got prayers in Parliament.

When speaking about faith schools (even the term seems innocuous, though it's so sinister), it is not enough to address non-discrimination in admission policies or hiring practices but about why it is bad for our children. Fundamentally, there shouldn't be any faith schools whatsoever, whether it's stated funded or private.

What about Sharia courts existing alongside mainstream court systems?

I can't understand that either. If you look at Sharia courts in Britain, they are dealing only in family matters, e.g. divorce, child custody, domestic violence, and so on and so forth. Family matters are not trivial matters as it's often portrayed.

They are not matters of the community. They are human rights issues. In many countries, where Sharia rules apply, this is one of the main areas of fight back by women's rights campaigners because of the huge amounts of discrimination against women.

For it to be sold to us here as a choice and a right is like selling FGM as a choice and right. The courts hold women's testimony to be half that of a man's. Women don't have unilateral right to divorce. Men do.

The rules are discriminatory and legitimise violence against women. For example, you've got one Sharia judge saying that there's no such thing as marital rape because women should expect to have sex within marriage. And that calling it rape is the act of aggression and not the actual rape. Or they have said if only we've had one amputation or stoning in Britain, there would be fewer thieves and less adultery, look how great Saudi Arabia is. These are the judges making rulings in these courts and making decisions on women's lives. They've been recorded saying, "You've been beaten by your husband. Have you asked why he's beating you? Is it because of your cooking? Is it because of you going out with your friends?"

It is outrageous. It is a scandal that they should be allowed. I think one of the things we're seeing is not only are the rules discriminatory, but the process itself is tantamount to abuse. That is the argument women's rights groups are making. No matter what a woman's background, a man's background, or a child's background, they are citizens first and foremost. They have rights. To relegate minority women to kangaroo courts, that are violating their rights should be considered a human rights scandal.

In international studies done by UN organs, or bodies, one of the major, probably the best, ways of improving the wellbeing and livelihood of an entire society, from economics to child and maternal mortality rates (reduction) in addition to increasing access and achievements in education, is under the guise of the empowerment of women.

When individuals such as others and yourself are campaigning and fighting for women's rights, and looking for ways, politically and otherwise, to empower women, it is actually improving the lives, on average, of everyone in the region or the society.

What do you think should be or is the best means through which to implement women's rights in cases that are very difficult? Where women have less of a vote or no vote, they have a lot of pressure not to speak up for their own rights.

I think one of the key ways, of course, is defending secularism. One of the problems is that secularism has become a dirty word. We hear how secular extremists are compared with religious extremists. I'm sorry. No. There's absolutely no comparison.

The French government saying there should be no conspicuous religious symbols in schools is actually a protection of school children. Why should a child be veiled because their parents are Muslims?

Don't we agree that children have the right to decide their political leaning and positions when they reach of age, why not also their beliefs? Why is it okay for religion to be imposed?

In that sense, compare that with acid being thrown in your face for going to school, compare that with compulsory veiling from the age of puberty, compare that with gender segregation, there's absolutely no comparison between what a secular state wants and what a theocracy wants.

We should unashamedly, unconditionally promote secularism. It is one the main preconditions for women's empowerment and rights. I think particularly when religion has any say in the state or law it is detrimental to women's rights.

That is one precondition. Equality before the law is key, but equality on a social and economic level are also key. That comes down to a system that puts profit before human need and human welfare. Religion is useful for that system as well.

It helps to keep women down.

Who are some personal heroes for you?

My parents are my personal heroes because the more I actually see how many young people have been abused and destroyed by their parents, it does make me realise how lucky I am to have the father that I have and my mum as well.

Also, the person who most has affected the way I think is the Iranian Marxist Mansoor Hekmat. Unfortunately, he died at 51, but his politics which centred on the human being has influenced my politics and the politics of many from Iran, the region, and Diaspora.

Do you have any recommended novels or more academic writings for people with an interest in or leaning in getting involved in these issues?

There is Mansoor Hekmat's *Collected Works* of which there is one translated into English. I would recommend that to anyone who wants to know more about Iranian politics but also about how to address everything from Islam, Islamism, veiling, secularism from a fundamentally human and Left perspective. Anything written by Algerian sociologist Marieme Helie Lucas is a great read. There are two interviews with her on the veil and gender segregation, which are brilliant. I'd recommend reading Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* for a view of the Iranian revolution (which was not Islamic) and its expropriation by the Islamist movement; Mona Eltahawy's *Headscarves and Hymens* on the veil as well as Karima Bennoune's *You Fatwa Does Not Apply Here* on people's resistance against Islamism. Elham Manea's *Women and Sharia Law* is also a really good book on legal pluralism in the UK.

For getting in contact with you, people can go to your Twitter and website.

I have a really good website now thanks to a really wonderful volunteer. My website was hideous before. It was embarrassing to refer people to it. It is www.maryamnamazie.com. Via the website, people can read things I've written, see videos, and media coverage.

Also, there's a TV program that is broadcast in Iran, which I do weekly with a co-host of mine. It is called *Bread and Roses*. It is Persian and English. It uses illegal satellite dishes to get into Iran. Many people have satellite dishes in Iran.

It just deals with free thinking, taboo breaking issues. There's always an interview. We've interviewed some of the greats as well as people who should be considered great by all free thinkers, but aren't as well known, unfortunately.

One of the things the program shows is that there's so many atheists, secularists, and free thinkers in the so-called Muslim world. I mean, it is important to see them, recognise them, because once we do it breaks this whole idea that dissent and free thought are Western concepts, which is nonsense.

That, in fact, there are lots of people fighting for the very same issues that people fight for here it home in Britain.

Also good organisations to support are the Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain and One Law for All.

Any feelings or thoughts in conclusion about the things we've discussed?

Sometimes, when we're having these discussions, people only see homogenous groups; they make decisions based on group identity. But group identity is very often imposed. It fails to recognise that there are so many individuals within those groups who are individuals, courageous and are resisting in many different ways - often at great risk to themselves.

If we can start seeing each other as people and recognising that there is a lot more which brings us together than separates us, I think we would have a real chance of pushing the Islamist and far-Right back.

One of the reasons that the Islamists are so violent is because they see this immense dissent. Unfortunately, it is not recognised in the West because it is either Islamophobic to criticise or you've got the Far-Right trying to hijack the criticism in order to scapegoat and vilify Muslims and migrants and push forward their own white identity politics.

It is important for us to go back to basics of universal rights, citizenship, secularism, and join hands together around political ideals and not identities. It is this united solidarity as human beings that has helped us overcome inhumanity in the past and can also help us today.

P.S.

* Wednesday, October 12, 2016:

<http://www.conatusnews.com/interview--extended--with-maryam-namazie.html>

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