

Largest gathering of ex-Muslims in history - The International Conference on Freedom of Conscience and Expression

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The International Conference on Freedom of Conscience and Expression [1], the largest gathering of ex-Muslims in history, was held during 22-24 July 2017 in London.

Over 70 notable speakers from 30 countries or the Diaspora gathered in what was dubbed “The Glastonbury of Freethinkers” and “a Conference of Heroes” to honour dissenters and defend apostasy, blasphemy, and secularism.

The sold-out conference highlighted the voices of those on the frontlines of resistance – many of them persecuted and exiled – and included the first London film screening of Deeyah Khan’s film, Islam’s Non Believers [2], a public art protest of 99 balloons representing those killed or imprisoned for blasphemy and apostasy [3], a body-painting action, and crucial discussions and debates on Islamophobia and its use by Islamists to impose de facto blasphemy laws, the relation between Islam and Islamism as well as communalism’s threat to universal rights, art as resistance and Laïcité as a human rights. The conference hashtag, #IWant2BFree, trended on Twitter during the two days.

At the conference, the Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain (CEMB) honoured ten individuals to mark its tenth anniversary, namely Bangladeshi freethinker Bonya Ahmed, Saudi freethinkers Ensaf Haidar and Raif Badawi, Moroccan atheist Zineb El Rhazoui, Philosopher AC Grayling, Centre for Secular Space’s Gita Sahgal and Yasmin Rehman, Algerian Sociologist Marieme Helie Lucas, Jordanian Atheists’ Founder Mohammad AlKhadra, Egyptian Atheist Founder of The Black Ducks Ismail Mohamed and Author and Scientist Richard Dawkins.

The conference issued resolutions against the no-platforming of Richard Dawkins by KPFA radio station, in defence of Ismail Mohamed who was prevented from leaving Egypt to speak at the conference by the Egyptian government, and on CEMB’s presence in Pride in London as well as a Declaration of Freethinkers (see below).

The event was live-streamed [4]. Professional video footage will be made available soon as well photos and more details of the event.

Resolution on Richard Dawkins

The International Conference on Free Expression and Conscience in London, the largest gathering of ex-Muslims in history, is concerned that Richard Dawkins, an invited speaker at the conference, has been de-platformed by the radio station KPFA in Berkeley, California because of his alleged “hurtful” comments on Islam.

Professor Dawkins is a well known critic of all religions, whose long-standing attacks on Christianity

have never resulted in anything approaching de-platforming. Indeed he has aired his views on KPFA itself. Belatedly, KPFA seems to have noticed that Islam is not exempt from his criticism. They have applied a hypocritical double standard in cancelling his appearance in Berkeley, and have disappointed the large numbers of people who had bought tickets to hear him.

Given that most of the speakers and delegates at our conference are Islam's apostates, many from countries where the legal penalty for apostasy is death, we find it necessary to remind KPFA that criticism of Islam is no different from criticism of Christianity or Judaism. Also, criticism of Islamism is no different from criticism of the Christian-Right, Jewish-Right or Hindu-Right. Criticism of religious ideas as well as violent religious political movements isn't bigotry but integral to free conscience and expression and vital for human progress.

We call on those - like KPFA - who should be our natural allies and 'progressives' whose freedoms and rights are largely the result of the fight against the church and Christianity not to betray or deny the same right to Islam's critics, non believers, and dissenters.

Progressive politics means fighting on many fronts, including against bigotry, xenophobia, the far-Right, which includes Islamism, and for freedom of conscience and expression.

Resolution for Ismail Mohamed

The International Conference on Freedom of Conscience and Expression is outraged to learn that the Egyptian government has prevented Ismail Mohamed from speaking at our conference, where he would have been a crucial voice. We demand that the Egyptian government allow Ismail freedom of movement and end his persecution and that of all freethinkers.

Resolution on the Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain at Pride

The Council of ex Muslims of Britain (CEMB) is part of a world-wide movement that supports people who wish to leave Islam and declare themselves ex-Muslim. We use the term ex-Muslim to highlight that the danger of leaving Islam risks death for apostasy. CEMB works to ensure that people are safe from hate and violence from their families, communities and states. CEMB joined Pride in London this year to highlight anti-LGBT persecution as well apostasy and blasphemy laws. 14 Islamic states (15 if ISIS-held territories are included) punish homosexuality with the death penalty. Moreover CEMB aimed to expose Islamist-affiliated mosques, like East London Mosque (ELM), which have given a platform to hate clerics who have justified the murder of gays and apostates.

After Pride, the ELM made a formal complaint over CEMB's 'Islamophobic' banners [5]. The complaint was referred to Pride's community advisory board to "decide on whether CEMB will be allowed to march again in the years ahead". A Pride Spokesperson added: "If anyone taking part in our parade makes someone feel ostracised, discriminated against or humiliated, then they are undermining and breaking the very principles on which we exist... Pride must always be a movement of acceptance, diversity and unity. We will not tolerate Islamophobia."

At the International Conference on Freedom of Conscience and Expression, we commit to the defence of LGBT+ Muslims and ex-Muslims. It is imperative to act against homophobia: 15 Islamic states and territories punish homosexuality with death. Vigilantes are encouraged to 'eliminate gays' in the words of Ramzan Kadyrov of Chechnya. In Britain, institutions like the East London Mosque have hosted preachers who incite hatred and justify the murder of LGBT and apostates.

The LGBT+ movement and worldwide Pride marches have been an enduring source of inspiration. 'Pride' shows that human rights can progress by people coming out and challenging prejudice through humour, outrage and politics. It was in this spirit that CEMB, for the first time, joined the

2017 Pride in London march. Pride is one of only events where LGBT+ ex-Muslims and Muslims can safely articulate their criticism, especially when their daily experiences are intrinsically linked with fear, violence and intimidation. Death threats are all too common. Nor do we need lessons in racism or anti-Muslim hatred, we experience these too. Our presence was widely welcomed and the courage of gay ex-Muslims affirmed with love and support. For old campaigners and new, the experience of the march was life changing.

CEMB's work is founded on universal human rights: the right to freedom of religion or belief and the right to free expression. Laws against homosexuality, blasphemy and apostasy and the terror associated with them are grave violations of human rights. Human rights do not advance unless perpetrators are named. Defending human rights: the right to life, the right to love and the right to free speech do not incite hatred. They constitute opposition to the politics of hate and fear.

Islamists use accusations of 'Islamophobia' to deceptively conflate criticism of a set of beliefs (Islam) and the religious-right (Islamism) with bigotry against a group of people (Muslims) in order to silence dissent. But we will not be silenced. We will continue to fight on several fronts: against racism and anti-Muslim hate and homophobia, for the rights of migrants and refugees, while simultaneously defending the right to apostasy and blasphemy.

If Pride in London is indeed a movement of 'acceptance, diversity and unity', it should vigorously oppose all laws which criminalise homosexuality, apostasy and blasphemy. Pride in London has a historic opportunity to render fundamentalist intimidation and bullying ineffective and make a stand that demonstrates that human rights trump religious hatred.

We call upon the organisers of Pride in London to:

- 1) Make a statement against all laws criminalising homosexuality, apostasy and blasphemy and against incitement to hate and murder by preachers at mosques like the East London mosque
- 2) Clarify whether by condemning 'Islamophobia', Pride meant to side with Islamists supporting the judicial murder of ex-Muslims and gay men
- 3) Affirm CEMB's continued presence at Pride in London to show that they side with dissenters and those defending the right to think, live and love as they choose.

Declaration of Freethinkers

Freethinkers stand for the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of expression and belief and freedom from fear and want. We believe in the universality and indivisibility of human rights. These rights flow from human reason and conscience. Without the free exercise of conscience and expression, all other rights are nullified.

Thirteen Islamic states and territories punish apostasy and blasphemy with death. Many freethinkers spend years on death row, or are lashed simply for the views that they hold. Apostates and freethinkers are murdered by vigilantes, or have fled their homes and countries. They experience numerous abuses, including violence, coercion and shunning in their families, exorcism, psychiatric 'treatment', forced marriage and sexual abuse.

At the International Conference on Freedom of Conscience and Expression, we note that there is a tsunami of freethinking and atheism that is challenging religious fundamentalism, especially Islamism. The Internet is doing to Islam what the printing press did to Christianity.

This peaceful resistance movement is often characterised as 'offensive' against religion, nation,

tradition or culture. Labelled as 'secular fundamentalists' or 'Islamophobic', victims are told that they are the cause of the violence whilst the organised networks of fundamentalists and extremists are projected as victims. Laws against 'defamation of religion' and accusations of 'offence' and 'Islamophobia' aid the extremists in silencing dissent and imposing de facto blasphemy laws.

Human rights organisations give scant attention to these violations. They have failed to investigate transnational networks that promote and perpetrate violence. They do not examine the ideologies of religious fundamentalism or make a case for the importance of freethinking in the face of a sustained religious assault. Governments, too, are failing to defend and protect freethinkers, either leading the assault or often choosing to side with killers and persecutors.

We honour the memory of all those who have died for freedom of conscience and expression, and stand in solidarity with our friends who cannot be with us because they are in prison, in hiding or have been denied visas.

The struggle for freedom of conscience is also a struggle against racism, xenophobia and far-right extremism. To be denied the simple right of conscience creates a human rights void, where all protections cease to exist. So we fight against all forms of bigotry and for universal human rights, including secularism.

The International Conference on Freedom of Conscience and Expression calls for the following:

1. End the killing of apostates and blasphemers
2. Release those on death row or in prison simply because they are atheists, freethinkers, apostates or blasphemers
3. Repeal apostasy and blasphemy laws
4. Clarify that freedom of conscience and freedom of belief guarantee the right to freedom of and from religion; and that religion is not an excuse for silencing dissent or threatening other rights and freedoms
5. Protect the right of freedom of expression to 'offend', without which no human progress is possible
6. A declaration of principles showing that the human right to freedom of conscience is explicitly embedded in human rights documents and is not limited by any right to religious belief.

For more information, contact the Conference Organising Committee:

<http://www.secularconference.com/organising-committee/>

To donate to CEMB, please visit our website.

The conference is sponsored by Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe; Atheist International Alliance; Bread and Roses TV; Center for Inquiry; Centre for Secular Space; Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain; Culture Project; Euromind; Equal Rights Now; Fitnah; Freedom from Religion Foundation; National Secular Society; One Law for All; Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science; Southall Black Sisters; and Secularism is a Women's Issue.

P.S.

* Written by CEMB on July 25, 2017:

<https://www.ex-muslim.org.uk/largest-gathering-of-ex-muslims-in-history/>

<http://www.secularconference.com>

Footnotes

[1] <http://www.secularconference.com>

[2] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bupBgmtsNWU>

[3] <https://twitter.com/SarahPeace/status/888819965293449216>

[4] which can be seen here:

<https://www.youtube.com/breadandrosestv>

[5] ESSF (article 41637), [Britain & homophobia - The London Pride, the East London Mosque and the Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain: responses to critics](#).