

CD2022 Press Release (final)

# Celebrating Dissent 2022, Report: You can cut the flowers but you cannot stop the Spring

Wednesday 16 November 2022, by [Participants to Celebrating Dissent 2022](#) (Date first published: 22 September 2022).

**Celebrating Dissent 2022, held in Cologne, Germany on August 20-21 2022, to coincide with [International Apostasy Day](#), was an extraordinary event with over 50 exceptional speakers from 30 countries worldwide. The two-day event is the largest gathering of ex-Muslim and freethought organizations and activists celebrating dissent and freedom. It was organized by the [Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain](#) and [Freethought Lebanon](#) in [partnership](#) with Atheist Alliance International, Atheist Refugee Relief, Center for Inquiry, Freedom from Religion Foundation, Giordano Bruno Stiftung National Secular Society, Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science, and Volkshochschule Köln.**

## Contents

- [Freethought Champions](#)
- [Panels and Performances](#)
- [Resolutions and Declarations](#)
- [Media Coverage](#)
- [APPENDICES](#)

*"We attended one of the largest gatherings of atheists and freethinkers in the world, Celebrating Dissent. An event with a very special tone – the aggression against Salman Rushdie on everyone's minds. More than ever, these atheists wanted to show that they are more and more numerous and determined to win the battle against obscurantism."* – [Charlie Hebdo, 24 August 2022](#)

Celebrating Dissent 2022, held in Cologne, Germany on August 20-21 2022, to coincide with [International Apostasy Day](#), was an extraordinary event with over 50 exceptional speakers from 30 countries worldwide, including scientist Richard Dawkins, activist Ensaf Haidar and actress and founder of Zina Foundation Nazmiye Oral.

The two-day event is the largest gathering of ex-Muslim and freethought organizations and activists celebrating dissent and freedom. It was organized by the [Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain](#) and [Freethought Lebanon](#) in [partnership](#) with Atheist Alliance International, Atheist Refugee Relief, Center for Inquiry, Freedom from Religion Foundation, Giordano Bruno Stiftung National Secular Society, Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science, and Volkshochschule Köln.

Celebrating Dissent 2022 included speeches, discussions, poetry, theatre, film, music and art, including a new song for the event by Shelley Segal, "[Murtaad](#)", [protest art](#) in support of Saudi freethinker Raif Badawi by Victoria Gugenheim, a [scream for women](#) by Afghan artist Sara Nabil,

and a march through Cologne City Centre [in support of Salman Rushdie](#).

At the opening of the conference, Sami Abdallah, President of Freethought Lebanon, [said](#): *“we stand for ideas and words while they stand for daggers and guns; we stand for humor and satire while they stand for state sponsored incitement to murder... We are the future, and they are the past.”*

Also at the opening, Maryam Namazie, Spokesperson of the Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain, called the ex-Muslim movement the “new civil rights movement of our times” and [said](#): *“[Salman Rushdie] is not the first nor will he be the last. The best of our best, cut down by the likes of the Iranian regime (directly responsible for Rushdie’s attack), by fundamentalists of all stripes and by, of course, inhuman ideologies... As Chilean poet Pablo Neruda said, however, ‘You can cut all the flowers but you cannot stop the Spring’.*

## **Freethought Champions**

Receiving a standing ovation, Scientist [Richard Dawkins was interviewed by Maryam Namazie](#) and awarded the [Freethought Champions Award](#). He described the ex-Muslim movement as [“one of the most important political movements of our time”](#) and praised it as one of the “decisive forces in defence of freedom of expression worldwide.” In introducing Dawkins for the award, Freethought Lebanon’s Co-Founder Mazen Abou Hamdan said: *“It is difficult to exaggerate the impact that professor Dawkins has had in promoting freethought around the world. In the Arab world alone, millions of copies of his books have been downloaded, and his YouTube videos have been watched hundreds of millions of times... We’re deeply convinced that in a few years and decades, the Middle East will change, and we have you to thank for that.”*

Iranian atheist Soheil Arabi who was on death row for blasphemy and is currently in internal exile after 8 years in prison in Iran was awarded the [Freethought Champions Award](#). Council of Ex-Muslims of Germany’s Mina Ahadi helped present the award. In his acceptance video, he [said](#): *“I have no regrets that I have been in prison for 8 years, despite the fact that I have lost my health because I think we have paved the way collectively together for liberation. I am a drop in this sea and glad to be part of the society of enlightenment.”* He added, *“When one is not free, then you cannot have a normal and meaningful life, you cannot choose; women cannot choose their dress, men cannot even decide on the shape of their beard. We were dead already; we are trying to be alive again.”*

Algerian secularist Marieme Helie Lucas also won the [Freethought Champions Award](#). Introducing her, founder of Southall Black Sisters Pragna Patel, said: *“She is the person from whom I have learnt everything there is to know about secularism as a feminist issue. She is a stalwart of the human rights movement – a principled woman who thinks and acts internationally and challenges all of us to break out of our parochialism and do solidarity instead of just talking about it... She is tireless. She is courageous. She is beautiful.”* The awards were sculpted by Iranian artist Sodabeh Gashtasebi.

## **Panels and Performances**

MCed by Fariborz Pooya and Veedu Vidz, discussions during the two days included topics such as:

- [Atheists and the Human Right to Protection](#)
- Asylum and Apostasy Workshop for ex-Muslims asylum seekers
- [Hijab, Bodily Autonomy and Women’s Rights](#)

- [Blasphemy, Islamophobia and Free Expression](#)
- [On Gods and Religious Morality](#)
- [Terror, Trauma and Survival](#)
- [The Ex-Muslim Movement](#)
- [Identity Politics, Racism and Fundamentalism](#), and
- [Creativity in Challenging Fundamentalism and Defending Secularism](#).

Contributors included: Ahmedur Rashid Chowdhury Tutul, Amed Sherwan, Ana González, Andreas Wolter, Annie Laurie Gaylor, Armin Navabi, Cemal Knudsen Yucel, Dan Barker, Fauzia Ilyas, Halima Salat, Harris Sultan, Helen Nicholls, Homaira Mansury, Betty Lachgar, Jenny Wenhammar, Jimmy Bangash, Khadija Khan, Lilith Raza, Lisa-Marie Taylor, Mazen Abou Hamdan, Michael Schmidt-Salomon, Milad Resaeimanesh, Mimzy Vidz, Mina Ahadi, Mohamad Hisham, Nada Topić Peratović, Nadia El Fani, Nina Sankari, Pragna Patel, Rana Ahmad, Sara Nabil, Savin Bapir-Tardy, Sohail Ahmad, Susana McIntyre, Wissam Charafeddine, Yahya Ekhou and Zara Kay.

[Lloyd Newson's "Can We Talk About This?", Sadiq Ali's "Chosen Haram"](#), Sara Nabil's "Bodies in War, My Hair is Free" were shown. YouTuber Veedu Vidz sang "[Music is Haram](#)." Halima Salat recited her poem "[Identity](#)." Shelley Segal unveiled a new song called "Murtadd." [Dan Barker](#) sang on piano. Artist Victoria Gugenheim led an action for International Apostasy Day, "[Raise Your Hands for Apostates](#)" and there was a screening of the moving film "No Longer Without You."

FEMEN Leader Inna Shevchenko was unable to attend the conference due to Russia's attack on Ukraine. She said: *"You, my fellow apostates and dissidents, know the high price of freedom and you also know the danger of fear and hesitation to stand for the right thing... Promise me, we won't stop."*

## **Resolutions and Declarations**

Celebrating Dissent 2022 adopted resolutions in defence of Salman Rushdie, for an end to Germany's Code 166 and for an International Day of Secularism or Laïcité.

The conference unanimously adopted the Declaration on the Celebration of Dissent, drafted by activist Gita Sahgal and the organizers.

The Declaration claims a world where no one is shunned, exiled, imprisoned, tortured or killed for their conscience. It claims a world where blasphemy, apostasy and dissent are celebrated not criminalized.

On August 22, members organizations of Ex-Muslims International met to discuss future strategy and plans.

## **IN DEFENSE OF SALMAN RUSHDIE**

Celebrating Dissent 2022 condemns the violent attack on Salman Rushdie and stands in unequivocal solidarity with the brave writer.

We are pleased to finally see support for Rushdie, rather than the usual vilification and victim blaming that comes after freethinkers are targeted by the Islamist movement.

Whilst the attacker's motives have not yet been revealed, his allegiance to the Islamic regime in Iran clearly links the attack to Khomeini's 1989 fatwa against Rushdie.

The Iranian regime, in specific, and the Islamist movement, in general, have responded to any freethought with terror and violence over decades. Entire generations of freethinkers have been brutally attacked, jailed, tortured and killed for their conscience and expression. Unfortunately, the brutal attack on Rushdie is not the first nor will it be the last.

Celebrating Dissent pays tribute to Rushdie and all dissenters at risk across the globe. We will continue to celebrate the rights to apostasy and blasphemy until no one is persecuted for their conscience and expression.

And still we rise.

## **END CODE 166**

Celebrating Dissent 2022 is deeply concerned with Code 166 in Germany's criminal code which shields religions and religious and ideological organizations from criticism or 'defamation' if deemed to 'disturb the public peace.' Punishments can consist of a fine or up to three years imprisonment.

Since any criticism of the sacred and taboo can be met with a disturbance to the public peace by fundamentalist violence and threats against critics, the code gives succor to the censors and oppressors whilst silencing dissenters.

A case in point is that of Abbas Mohammadpoor, a member of the Council of Ex-Muslims of Germany, who has been found guilty under this code and fined for his criticisms of Islam and Mohammad, Islam's prophet, in the city of Stuttgart. He will be appealing the July 4, 2022 decision.

We call on the German government to scrap Code 166 of the criminal code, drop all sentences and charges pertaining to this Code and to respect the right to apostasy, heresy and blasphemy, which are integral to freedom of conscience and expression and are protected under international human rights law.

## **INTERNATIONAL SECULARISM DAY**

Celebrating Dissent 2022 calls for the establishment of International Secularism Day on 10 December to coincide with International Human Rights Day.

Secularism or *laïcité* is the separation of religion from the state, education, law and public policy.

At a time when secularism is under concerted attack by the religious-Right, including in secular states like France, India, Israel, Turkey and USA to name a few, we reiterate the importance of secularism for ex-Muslims, freethinkers, atheists, women and ethnic, sexual and religious minorities.

Secularism is a fundamental principle, human right and a minimum prerequisite for the respect of rights and freedoms and for democratic politics and societies

## **DECLARATION ON THE CELEBRATION OF DISSENT**

As atheists, agnostics, ex-Muslims and freethinkers we stand for a world in which all human beings enjoy freedom of expression and conscience, and freedom from fear and want.[1]

We claim our freedom from religion, from superstition.

We claim our freedom to love and live as we choose, to creativity and to enjoy the benefits of scientific and human progress.

We affirm our right to act with reason and conscience.

Apostasy and blasphemy are fundamental rights protected by freedom of religion or belief and freedom of expression and are grounded in the universality of rights which apply to all human beings everywhere.

Our freedoms depend on our rights to atheism, apostasy and blasphemy; on the right to be free from religion and to criticize Islam and any other religion.

We reject apostasy, blasphemy and religious laws as grave violations of rights and call for their immediate abolition.

We reject the religious-Right of all stripes. The rule of theocrats is the end of and antithesis to democratic politics, free thought and expression and basic rights, particularly of women and ethnic, sexual and religious minorities.

We reject and condemn xenophobia, bigotry and racism against non-believers and believers.

We reject cancel culture, self-righteous intolerance and a patronizing defence of 'hurt sensibilities' that aim to silence blasphemers and suppress rational discourse.

We reject the criminalization of the right to asylum and claim the right to protection for those of us fleeing persecution. Asylum is a human right recognized in international and national laws. Governments are duty-bound to protect those fleeing persecution.

We affirm that freedom of expression (as long as it is not inciting violence) is a bedrock of human rights and progress. It is a necessity, particularly for those challenging the powerful, sacred and taboo.

We affirm that the struggle taking place in the world today is not a clash of civilizations but a clash between theocrats on the one hand and secularists on the other.

We want to live in a world where believers and non-believers are respected as human beings but where beliefs can be challenged and even mocked without fear. A world where doubt and dissent are seen as integral to the human quest for truth rather than expressions to be censored and silenced under the guise of hurt sentiments or 'Islamophobia.'

We want to live in a world where secularism or laïcité, the separation of religion from the state, law, education and public policy, is considered a fundamental principle and human right, integral to the fulfilment of our freedoms.

We claim for ourselves a world where no one is shunned, exiled, imprisoned, tortured or killed for their conscience.

We claim for ourselves a world where blasphemy, apostasy and dissent are celebrated.

## **Media Coverage**

[Maryam Namazie: "The Islamists are afraid of us"](#), Trend Detail, August 25, 2022

[Cologne : Les mécréants célèbrent Salman Rushdie et préparent l'avenir](#), Charlie Hebdo, August 24, 2022

[Maryam Namazie : « Les islamistes ont peur de nous »](#), Charlie Hebdo, August 24, 2022

[Portraits d'Athées : « Pour vivre libre, j'ai dû fuir mon pays »](#), Charlie Hebdo, August 24, 2022

[Säkularismus: Eine Freiheitsgarantie für alle](#), HPD, August 24, 2022

[»Die Fundamentalisten werden uns nicht aufhalten!« Ex-Muslime aus aller Welt demonstrierten in Köln für Salman Rushdie](#), GBS, 23 August 2022

["Du kannst die Blumen stutzen, aber du kannst den Frühling nicht aufhalten!"](#), HPD, August 23, 2022

[Sortir de l'Islam, mais à quel prix ?](#), Le Point, August 23, 2022

[Leaving Islam, but at what cost?](#), Detail News, August 23, 2022

[Abandonar el Islam, pero ¿a qué precio?](#), Trend News Spanish, August 23, 2022

[Darum haben sie den Islam verlassen, Celebrating Dissent 2022 in Köln](#), Bild, August 22, 2022

["Celebrating Dissent 2022" - Ex-Muslims report: That's why they left Islam](#), Detail Zero, August 22, 2022

[Größte Versammlung von Ex-Muslimen – deshalb haben sie den Islam verlassen](#), The World News, August 22, 2022

["Celebrando la disidencia 2022" – Informe de exmusulmanes: Por eso abandonaron el Islam](#), News ES Euro, August 22, 2022

["Merayakan Perbedaan Pendapat 2022" – Laporan Mantan Muslim: Inilah Alasan Mereka Meninggalkan Islam](#), Samosir News, August 22, 2022

["Célébrer la dissidence 2022" – Rapport d'ex-musulmans : c'est pourquoi ils ont quitté l'islam](#), News Day FR, August 22, 2022

## APPENDICES

### **Appendix I.**

Opening Speech by Sami Abdallah, President of Freethought Lebanon

Good morning everyone and welcome to "Celebrating Dissent 2022"! More than 50 advocates of freedom of thought, from over 30 countries, have come together to celebrate freethought and dissent through talks, poetry, film, art and music. In addition to our esteemed speakers and performers, we are joined by a large number of supporters and activists from around the world. The demand on tickets to attend this conference has surpassed all our expectations, and we were sold out in the early weeks of announcing the conference. This great eagerness to attend and celebrate dissent is a sign of how increasingly important our voice is becoming.

Last week, Salman Rushdie, a titan of free speech, was cowardly assaulted by a religious fanatic in New York. The barbaric attack perfectly captures the dichotomy and contrast between us and the religious fascists who carry out such atrocities:

- We stand for Freedom of thought, while they stand for intellectual subjugation.
- We stand for Ideas and words while they stand for daggers and guns.
- We stand for Humor and satire while they stand for state sponsored incitement to murder.
- We stand for Robust rational discourse while they stand for exaggerated sensitivities that mask medieval superstitions.

We are the future, and they are the past.

This violent and narrow-minded worldview is not limited to a few extremist groups, but is also enshrined in law in many countries around the world where apostasy is still punishable by death. Think about that for a second: if you don't believe in somebody else's imaginary friend, you will be put to death.

Even when people believe in these enforced myths, they can still be abused, assaulted, imprisoned and hurt if they express any non-conforming opinion. Millions of women continue to be forcefully veiled against their wishes, and millions more continue to be persecuted because of their sexual orientation and identity. Last year, women in Afghanistan lost their most basic right of education. Not long ago in the USA, the supreme court ruled against a woman's right to bodily autonomy.

The rise of these transgressions is very much linked to the rise of intolerant religious ideologies. Despite all the suffering that these ideologies are causing, clerics continue to claim that attacking their religious beliefs does not fall under free speech, and that all of us have a duty to 'respect their feelings'. Yet as Salman Rushdie reminds us: "The moment you declare a set of ideas be immune from criticism, satire, derision, or contempt, freedom of thought becomes impossible".

Today we gather to once again uphold our right to dissent from religious dogma - our right to criticize and ridicule it - and our right to freedom of thought and freedom of expression.

Our world today is becoming increasingly polarized. We see a rise on the right in xenophobic, racist, and anti-refugee rhetoric. And we see a trend in the far left to blindly defend Islam in the name of countering "islamophobia". The space of free rational discourse is shrinking, and censorship is on the rise - many times by those who claim to be activists. Yet we see no contradiction in denouncing both racism and harmful religious dogma. We see no contradiction in both defending refugees at risk and opposing the dangerous teachings of Sharia law.

Our gathering today is not just to express a different point of view. Experience has shown us that such conferences offer immensely rich opportunities for networking. Five years ago, I first met Maryam and other representatives of ex-Muslim organizations. We decided to build an alliance then, and we have since accomplished great things.

We have launched "Atheist Day" which continues to be celebrated on March 23<sup>rd</sup> of every year. We also launched Apostasy Day and worked together to save tens of atheists who were fleeing persecution. This weekend's conference is yet another fruit of this collaboration.

I invite you all to take this opportunity to meet like-minded individuals and build communication bridges. There is indeed power in numbers, and our voices and actions can be amplified if we work together and if we learn from each other.

Finally, I would like to express my deep gratitude to all the volunteers, sponsors, and speakers who made this possible. Organizing this conference has taken a lot of hard work, dedication, and resources. It wouldn't have been possible without you.

Thank you for your time and I wish you a fruitful conference.

## **Appendix II.**

Opening Speech by Maryam Namazie, Spokesperson of the Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain

It is good to see you, especially since Covid and so soon after the violent attack on our courageous Salman Rushdie. He is not the first nor will he be the last.

There are countless others, languishing on death row, in hiding, in prison, buried in mass graves.

The best of our best, cut down by the likes of the Iranian regime (directly responsible for Rushdie's attack), by fundamentalists of all stripes and by of course inhuman ideologies – religion and Islam – that justify and legitimize violence and submission.

I accuse them all – for state crimes, religious crimes and crimes of the religious-Right.

Also. I accuse those complicit or silent, including states that appease this movement and the cowards that side with murderers and blame victims.

As Chilean poet Pablo Neruda said, however, 'You can cut all the flowers but you cannot keep Spring from coming.'

There are too many of us. We are the innumerable – not just yearning for but demanding, insisting, without apology and shame, the right to live, breath, love and think as we choose.

We are the ex-Muslim movement, the new civil rights movement of our era, challenging obscurantism, religious dogma, hate, violence, fear, submission and inhumanity with reason, creativity, love, non-violence, courage, humanity and dissent.

Like all civil rights movements, we are transgressive, subversive, deemed dangerous for reimagining a world without permission.

A world that criminalizes fatwas, sharia courts and theocracies. A world that celebrates apostasy, blasphemy and dissent.

We know history is written by victors, the powerful and privileged but there is always also a corresponding history of resistance and dissent that challenges the powerful, sacred and taboo.

It's the only history for human progress that counts.

However, many flowers they cut and they cut, our movement will forever be etched in the history of resistance.

And spring – it is a-coming.

## **Appendix III.**

Mazen Abou Hamdan, Cofounder of Freethought Lebanon, presenting the Freethought Champions Awards to Richard Dawkins

It is difficult to exaggerate the impact that Professor Dawkins has had in promoting freethought around the world. In the Arab world alone, millions of copies of his books have been downloaded, and his YouTube videos have been watched hundreds of millions of times.

This wasn't only important to change our minds about one particular opinion. In our part of the

world, we are not allowed to learn about evolution in schools. So even those of us were skeptics about religion, we were still caught or imprisoned – we could not escape, for example, the “argument from design”. It’s true, we thought, that religion is unfair to women, but on the other hand the “eye” is so complicated that there must have been some designer. And then we read Dawkins’ books, and we were liberated. This was incredibly empowering to us as individuals. It was inspiring to us. The impact he has had is not only limited to changing our own minds. I strongly think that all the activism we have done since then, and all the activism that all of us in this room will continue to do, is indebted to the inspiration and empowerment which professor Dawkins has given us.

Even the launch of our own organization, Freethought Lebanon, began with the screening of the film “Dawkins on Darwin”, which was sent to us more than 10 years ago by the Richard Dawkins Foundation.

So, we are very pleased to be in a position to offer you this award, and we promise you to keep up the good work. We’re deeply convinced that in a few years and decades, the Middle East will change, and we have you to thank for that.

#### **Appendix IV.**

Mina Ahadi, Founder of the Central Council of Ex-Muslims – Germany, presenting the Freethought Champions Award to Soheil Arabi

I want to greet you on behalf of all those present at this conference and on behalf of the people who worked to save you, Soheil, from execution.

The Islamic Republic not only issued a fatwa against Salman Rushdie, but also ruled against a large number of atheists and executed hundreds of them. Those who stayed in Iran and say they don’t have a religion or don’t accept Islam, like you, become prisoners of the government, get sentenced to death.

But at the same time, you fought and now the government is afraid of you, not you of the Islamic government.

I am sure that one day this nightmare will end and with the overthrow of the Islamic regime, all of us in Cologne, in Berlin, in Lebanon, in Baghdad and in Iran will breathe a sigh of relief.

Long live your struggle against the Islamic regime, long live Soheil Arabi.

#### **Appendix V.**

Maryam Namazie Interviews Soheil Arabi

Maryam Namazie:

Soheil Arabi, it’s an honor to have you with us. Congratulations on the Freethinkers’ Award at Celebrating Dissent 2022.

Tell us about your personal circumstances, as well as your mothers who bravely campaigned on your behalf. You were in prison for 8 years for apostasy, freethinking and for defending political prisoners. You are now in internal exile in Iran.

Soheil Arabi:

Hello. I am also very pleased to be with you. I must say that freethinkers, new thinkers and dissidents here in Iran are all in a prison and facing torture. Some prison torture chambers have the signs "Prison" at its gates but other places have no visible sign. From very beginning of becoming an atheist, apostates are subject to mistreatment by their family, school, university and society at large. As soon as we begin to express our opinion, certainly the torture and mistreatment intensifies and our task becomes more difficult.

In my 8 years in prison, nothing was new. The only difference was that it was formally called a prison. Really from the day we become apostates, the torture against us starts. In prison, this is more formal.

As far as my mother is concerned, she has been sentenced to imprisonment for defending me and when I was sentenced to death, she suffered a heart attack. Recently, she also suffered a brain hemorrhage when she was called for interrogation. Putting pressure on the families of political prisoners has become part and parcel of the prisoner's torture, unfortunately.

Maryam Namazie:

I am sorry to hear. Please convey our warmest wishes to your mother and family. She has given all of us courage for the support she has given you and other political prisoners. You mentioned the pressures on you and your family. This is reality of life for freethinkers and dissidents who are living in Iran. You have worked hard both inside the prison and now whilst in internal exile, to expose prison conditions of freethinkers imprisoned in the Islamic regime of Iran. Would you give more details about their conditions in prison in Iran?

Soheil Arabi:

There are many types of political prisoners in Iran and the treatment and pressure on them is different. For example, those who want reform but still believe in an Islamic regime receive lesser sentences and their treatment is different in prison compared to those who completely oppose the ideology of the government and those who are secular and believe that rules and laws should be earthly not divine. Those who believe in fundamental changes suffer many more tortures if they are not executed. Execution has become more difficult for the regime, not because they are more tolerant, but because people are supporting us. A decade ago, any apostate would be executed for declaring that they have left Islam. Fortunately, support from the people and international support have led to slight improvements in the situation. Pressure on the atheist prisoner is much more than on anyone else, more than pressure on a murderer or someone who has undertaken a major fraud or someone who has planted a bomb. For example, when I was sentenced to death, my mother asked the prosecutor "why do you want to execute my son? He has not killed anyone!" The prosecutor responded:

"A murderer kills one person, where your son has murdered the government!" You see their view is that anyone who is engaged in enlightenment is killing a government. That is why they take the most severe revenge against the prisoner.

Maryam Namazie:

You point out an important issue that enlightenment is important. It is a fact about Iranian society that freethinking, enlightenment and atheism have significantly grown. Why do you think this is happening and how does this reflect in prisons?

Soheil Arabi:

The government is very much terrified of enlightenment. This is because the political economy of the

Islamic regime is based on religion. If you take away religion from the Islamic regime, if you remove superstition, then the state cannot survive. A democratic system will replace it where there is no room for mullahs and Basijis. They will be replaced with specialists and experts. Therefore, the regime's survival is based on maintaining superstition and they are frightened of enlightenment. Fortunately, despite dangers and difficulties, the enlightenment and legacy of generations before us and in particular with the social media, enlightenment has flourished in Iran and I can safely say that 80% of our young generation do not believe in these superstitions. You rarely see anyone who believes in the religion, prays or independently decides to wear the hijab. People despise the religious government and fortunately even those who previously believed in religion have today turned their backs on religion. Thanks to social media networks and enlightenment work and sacrifices that our friends have made in these years. In fact, the Achilles heel of this government is enlightenment, the more awareness there is among people the more difficult it is for a religious government based on superstition.

Maryam Namazie:

You as the most famous atheist of Iran and I think one of the famous atheists of the world. Despite all the dangers you face both in prison and currently in internal exile in Iran why would you still continue to carry on?

Soheil Arabi:

I started this work with a blog called "A generation that no longer wants to be burnt!" because our generation and our previous generation were really burnt by the fire of religion and theocracy. All of our lives were endangered by religion. From our birth, they whispered Shahada in our ears. We have had no choice - not even control of our hairstyle, dress. We were robbed by religion. In short, our lives were burnt. The day we began to mutiny against this servitude, we said to ourselves that we may suffer but at least our children and the generation after us could possibly have a better life. Fortunately, we have so far succeeded. With our pens we have overcome the prison, hanging rope, truncheon and boots. With solidarity, our generation has overcome a thousand-year-old reactionary entity. I have no regrets that I have been in prison for 8 years, despite the fact that I have lost my health because I think we have paved the way collectively together for liberation. I am a drop in this sea and glad to be part of the society of enlightenment.

Maryam Namazie:

You already responded to this in some ways, but is it worth it?

Soheil Arabi:

We had truly nothing to lose but our chains. We were turned into walking corpses. When one is not free, then you cannot have a normal and meaningful life, you cannot choose; women cannot choose their dress, men cannot even decide on the shape of their beard. We were dead already; we are trying to be alive again. Even if you want to see the individual benefit, it was worth it. Even though we viewed it as part of a moral question that one must protest injustice while alive; one should not be expected to live under indignity. This is a moral question that one should not live under indignity. Even if you look at it from an economic point of view benefit point of view, we were killed many times under this government's rule. They had taken away our choices. Without our permission we have been assigned as Muslims and our right to leave religion removed. For this very reason we broke our chains and we did the right thing. If we kept silent, the burnt generations would have followed us. I am really pleased to have achieved this a lot sooner. When I was criticizing religion relentlessly, I thought I would get executed and only after 50 or 100 years might it have an impact.

However, and fortunately, because of unity and solidarity and the advantage offered us by the new technology, we have achieved our goals a lot sooner. The younger generation born two decades after us, have more enquiring minds and will not accept the religious peddlers, they are a thoughtful generation. This truly has given me relief.

Maryam Namazie:

You earlier referred to the importance of freethinking and freedom of conscience and also the importance of the right to insult the sacred and apostasy for progress in a society. The more advanced a society, the more respect for freedom to think and conscience. In your view, what is the significance of criticizing, ridiculing and challenging of these laws for Iran and freethinking in the world?

Soheil Arabi:

It is important for this to become a global movement as this is not just an issue for the people of Iran, rather it is important for all of the Middle East; many places in the world are grappling with this issue.

The cost of iconoclasm is very high; is a matter of life and death. If we turn this into a global movement and if we succeed to turn it into a right for people across the world to have the right to criticize, mock and question everything, we would certainly have a better world in the future and life would be easier for all of us.

Islam and generally theocracy has many victims and its winning card has been prohibition of questioning. When we were children, any question to the religious teacher would be met with physical punishment and ridiculed. They would put a rubbish bin on our head to teach us a lesson and threaten us. Questioning has been banned in Iran; insulting the sacred is prohibited. Although we have paid a great price with many executed and imprisoned, but we have to a great extent broken the taboo!

I think the solution is to turn this into a global movement and create a base and support for atheists and freethinking prisoners via global protest and activity to turn this into a practical right for everyone across the world to be able to challenge anything and have the right not to have a religion and to leave a religion. These are important for our plan for the future whilst the problem still remains.

Maryam Namazie:

You mentioned that the support you received in Iran and globally helped you while in prison and saved you from certain death. What is the significance of this solidarity and unity and what message do you have for those who can hear you. What can they do?

Soheil Arabi:

When I was arrested and sentenced to death in 2013, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps unit published a plan to fight atheists. A number of people were executed. Some were members of "The Campaign to Remember" or Facebook activists who were exposing and mocking the sacred as a means of enlightenment. Many were executed or given long term sentences. In that year I was sentenced to death, Ali Rastani was executed at that very time for asking simple questions.

I remember whilst in interrogation, they used to beat me severely and when I was becoming unconscious, I could hear the head torturer saying - "don't kill him here; he should be hanged

legally so he becomes a lesson for others not to mock our Imams and insult the sacred.” They had a clear plan to carry out the execution legally to use it as media propaganda. Fortunately, this happened at the time that Twitter had become prevalent and social media was used extensively in Iran and we were lucky that we managed to send information out and people were very supportive. There were a number of Twitter campaigns that came to the attention of the public and the people of the world responded. From that moment, the prison authorities and officials changed their approach. Previously it was with threats, but now they were trying to make me confess that I was on the US’ payroll and receiving funding to justify my execution. Since they failed to force me make to a false confession and under immense public and international pressure, they said they would commute the death sentence but wanted me to refrain from engaging and the media. They were petrified of people’s united and coordinated protest about my plight. This certainly made it costly for the authorities.

The security forces have two strategies. Firstly, to stamp out and suppress any opposing or dissenting voice by making people fearful; the other strategy is led by more pragmatic approach to minimize the cost and risk for the regime. Where there is extensive and widespread support the second strategy group will become a dominate approach to reduce the cost and risk for the government. Extensive and coordinated support and if it becomes a global response certainly has an impact. We currently have Yousef Mehrdad and Sadolah Fazeli at risk of execution on charges of insulting the representative of God and leader of the Islamic regime. They are in Arak city torture chambers and are suffering hard times. Sexual assault, rape and torture are used against political prisoners and the prisoners face a really harsh and difficult condition for working for enlightenment. We therefore must work together to support them and make it really costly for the regime to suppress freethinkers. One very useful way is to use social media, particularly international protest and coordinated Twitter action to engage all the world.

Maryam Namazie:

Thank you Soheil Arabi for talking to us and congratulations again on your award.

Soheil Arabi:

Thank you. I accept this award on behalf of all the brave women who fighting compulsory veiling and all the mothers who are supporting their children and to all of those people who are fighting this injustice and hope very soon we get rid of these oppressors!

## **Appendix VI.**

Pragna Patel, Founder of Southall Black Sisters, presenting the Freethought Champions Award to Marieme Helie Lucas

I am honoured and delighted to introduce the recipient of the next award. She will not like this and will kill a few of us afterwards! But the next recipient of this award is Marieme Helie Lucas.

She is the person from whom I have learnt everything there is to know about secularism as a feminist issue. She is a stalwart of the Human Rights movement – a principled woman who thinks and acts internationally and challenges all of us to break out of our parochialism and do solidarity instead of just talking about it.

She came into my life in her avatar as a founder of Women Living Under Muslim Laws – note not Muslim Women living under Muslim Laws! I was involved in a case in the late 80s in which a Pakistani woman – Rabia Janjua – was fighting against a deportation order in the UK. She had been charged under Zina laws in Pakistan for having a relationship with a man outside marriage. She had

fled to the UK to join her husband but then left him due to domestic abuse. As she was dependent on her husband for her immigration status, she found herself facing deportation. It was one of the first asylum cases involving the intersection of gender and religion in the UK.

Women Living Under Muslim Laws through their journals provided much of the evidence that we used to argue that Zina Laws were discriminatory and criminalized women in Pakistan. The evidence was key to the successful outcome of the case. It goes to show how important it is to bear witness to atrocities perpetrated in the name of religion and to document it.

Marieme Helie Lucas is unflinching in her political activism and has clarity of vision. She recognized that secularism is a feminist issue long before we knew how to articulate it and has founded a website by the same name. Today, she told me about her fears about excluding many French speaking people due to our tendency to communicate in English, stating that it is vital that they must also be part of this conversation. To me it is yet one more example of how she thinks and works internationally.

She is tireless. She is courageous. She is beautiful.

Please come up and accept this award – Marieme Helie Lucas.

[Photos and videos are published on CD2022 official website.](#)

For more information, please contact the organizers:

Maryam Namazie (Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain)

Sami Abdallah (Freethought Lebanon)

[cd2022.freethoughtlebanon.net](http://cd2022.freethoughtlebanon.net)

Celebrating Dissent 2022 official website:

[cd2022.freethoughtlebanon.net](http://cd2022.freethoughtlebanon.net)

[1] Echoing the words of the preamble to the UDHR: *‘Whereas disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind, and the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people.’* The UDHR does not mention God or any divinity.

---

## **P.S.**

- Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain - CEMB. 22 August 2022:

<https://www.ex-muslim.org.uk/2022/08/cd2022-report-you-can-cut-the-flowers-but-you-cannot-stop-th-e-spring/>