

## Inter-Religious Harmony and Free Speech

Christina Ishizaki Rutkauskas  
February 6, 2015



4th Feb. 2015, House of Lords, Committee Room 4 Hosted by the Rt. Hon. Baroness Verma, Under Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change

The evening served as a gathering where “communities can come together to be candid and have an honest conversation,” remarked Baroness Verma in her introduction. Indeed there was an open forum and debate in which individuals of different backgrounds and religions expressed their opinions and perspectives on the topic of inter-religious harmony and free speech.

### Speakers

Humphrey Hawksley, BBC World Affairs Correspondent  
Keith Best, Trustee of UPF, Former CEO of Freedom from Torture  
Nicola Bailey, Assistant Principal Archbishop Lanfranc Academy  
Sheikh Dr Hojjat Ramzy, Chair Education Committee of the Muslim Council of Britain  
Rev Dr Marcus Braybrooke, President of the World Congress of Faiths



Nicola Bailey was the first speaker to deliver her view on the topic presented. Bailey is the Assistant Principal and Head of Parent and Community Services at the Archbishop Lanfranc Academy, and the director of SPICE, a charity based in Croydon that helps families in crisis through the use of community support services, volunteers, and educators. The curriculum of the academy is one formed that engages both parents and their children in order to promote the credo in which inter-religious harmony

coincides with that within adults and children of different generations. The “hundreds of children [are treated] like our own,” said Bailey, and “[we] encourage our children and adults to practice religion during the day.”

“Adults shape and teach children. How often do we check our responsibility,” asked Nicola Bailey. The responsibility that was reiterated is that of self-censorship when practising the human right of free speech. Free speech is a freedom that comes with social responsibility and the necessity to understand people by getting to know them for who they are, not what they believe. It all begins with education. Both children and adults of SPICE and the Archbishop Lanfranc Academy are encouraged to practise religion as well as function as a cooperative in which parents on different days care for children of other parents to engage and teach each other. Children are encouraged to ask questions. The focus is on family. To help families not just with their crises, but to help leave a legacy in which effective communication and conflict resolution are achieved.

“We have a moral conscience.” “There is always a consequence to the words we use.” Nicola Bailey emphasised that adults need to think how they would affect children. It is our responsibility to help shape and educate future generations. The first point of beginning this is within the home with our families. Education is golden, freedom of speech is a right, together they find a balance in which humanity is the core of our fundamental values that continue helps us to accept and learn about other religions and cultures.

“The gem of [Nicola’s remarks] is what is right and what is wrong in people,” opened Humphrey Hawksley. Hawksley is currently a BBC World Affairs Correspondent. He joined the BBC in 1983 and reached his first of many great achievements in 1986 reporting the conflict of Tamil separatists in Sri Lanka. Years after he spent covering major events in Asia, and in 1994 set up the first BBC television bureau in Beijing. He moved to London in 1997 where he has since held his current position. Before sharing his remarks, Hawksley shared five different quotes of individuals expressing free speech ranging from the notorious anti-Semitic comment made by Henry Ford to that of the imprisoned Saudi blogger Raif Badawi. All these remarks have been made freely by different individuals of different backgrounds.



What is the responsibility of us when we use freedom of speech? “Charlie Hebdo would not be published in the UK for libel laws” would not allow it. Hawksley emphasised the importance of looking at the bigger picture before expressing a point or an opinion. To think how a comment would affect the person or people you are about to address. Different opinions can lead to consequences or acts of violence. ISIS is a prime example of such in which Hawksley said that they are being given the exposure they do not need.

Their barbaric acts are examples of individuals who are not sponsored, who are simply unemployed or low men that take a moral cause and use it. We must practise self-censorship for the sake of how the public can be influenced or affected.

“Each society should have clarity for what one can or cannot do or say,” said Keith Best. Best is a graduate of Oxford and notable barrister who has held an illustrious career including that of being the former director of Prisoners Abroad and former CEO of Freedom from Torture. He focused on the legal aspect of freedom of speech. First Best asked how prepared are we as individuals to have our civil liberties be taken away? Six years ago, blasphemy was abolished from the UK laws. Obscene publication act still remains, the Race Relations Act was included in the Equalities Act, however, adjustments were made. The adjustments were the exclusion of religion. Sikhs and Jews were determined not to be a race as they are bonded by religion, and as such current laws protect speeches that relate to racial hatred, but acts such as anti-Semitism remain legal. Should religion or beliefs be protected in the eyes of the law?

We as society must recognise the sensitivity of others when using freedom of speech. Pope Francis recently remarked that freedom of speech should not be used to cause offence. Prime Minister David Cameron said freedom of speech is allowed as long as it is within the law. This has brought an urge to clarify what can or cannot be said or done. This does not mean that there must be restrictions on what one can say, but there should be some restraint. “If some [find offence] to what one says does not mean that [what they said] is not validated.” “Sensitivity in one side of the world is different from the other side of the world.” We must realise that we cannot hide behind freedom of speech because of the law because as the years progress, we as society will continue to integrate and become communities of multi-faiths and backgrounds. Before expressing yourself, ask how many people what you say can offend.

Going back to the origins or our beliefs and religions will help us to learn more about the time and life of society at that time. Human rights have Judeo-Christian roots, but are now recognised as a universal doctrine. Answers and opinions will change as society evolves. Sensitivity lies with the majority. The best way to control sensitivity and freedom of speech is by the “majority controlling the minority.” Christians and Jews make up a great percentage of the population and as such have the social responsibility to educate others by not remaining silent as “we must not be fearful” Religion will always be with us as even during the times of the worst torture, Best shared that the torture victims he had met have all said that religion saved them. “Humanity indulges in conflict” and it can be both constructive and destructive. Just as a barrister would, when wanting to test the strength of your argument, put yourself in the shoes of the other person you are in the debate with to see how your comments will affect or impact them.

“Loving good, loving our neighbours” is the core of our religion insisted Sheikh Dr. Hojjat Ramzy. Sheikh Ramzy is the Director of Iqra Islamic Institute and current Chair of the Education Committee of

the Muslim Council of Britain. His speech was one of the anticipated as the topic of the event sparked from the attacks in Paris. If all people can agree on principle of love then there would be the ability to understand the traditions and beliefs of others. Islam allows the freedom of speech but there is “a limitation when it comes to harm.” Verses were recited from the Quran by Sheikh Ramzy when it came to speech. Emphasis was on holding speech if good cannot be said. Bad language is to be ignored, and instead rise above it as words that cannot be recorded by angels should not be expressed. “Everyone has a right to hold opinion without restriction”, but this freedom is not absolute. The government exercises restriction when it comes to matters of national security, hate speech, and others. “Freedom should not cause damage or harm to others.”

We must live as brothers and sisters under the protection of the law. If the US Constitution can put limit to freedom of speech in circumstances of public safety, France should protect the human rights of others in the matter of freedom of speech the Sheikh commented. The matter of terrorism is political and not that of religion. We cannot reform the entire world. Development is still going on as Muslim countries such as Afghanistan, are years behind. However, despite the backwards progression, Islam is the first religion to have given women rights. Stories of religious hate were expressed by some attendees. One gentleman shared the story of the attack his wife faced of having her hijab pulled by a group of men after the news of September 11th was shared. Despite the protective instinct, it was sadly concluded that being a Muslim in present day is dangerous. This point brings back the insistence of the majority needing to control the minority. The extreme acts of terrorism of the current times are all politically charged in the guise of religion. It is not religion that causes people to act on violence, but their distance from humanity. As a society, we must collectively get back in touch with humanity. The law protects us and our freedom allows us to speak out.

“Religion of hate is deadly” and we must “discover our humanity,” said Reverend Dr. Marcus Braybrooke. Reverend Braybrooke is the President of the World Congress of Faiths and the co-founder of the Three Faiths Forum. He opened sharing a horrific experience of religious intolerance when 18 and in Israel after his military service. He recalled the atrocious sights he saw in a small Holocaust. The visit only sparked the importance of eliminating ignorance and prejudice. We need to come together to work together to achieve harmony. During his 20 years residing in India, Reverend Braybrooke shared his time working in a leprosy clinic. People of different religions came together to help the sick and instead of seeing each other for their beliefs, they got to know each other as people. There must “be a challenge [of the] exclusiveness that are characteristic of some religions.” There should be more open days of religious institutions just as in Singapore as one Singaporean attendee shared.

We must be careful of what we say. Most terms we use are politically charged and instead humanity must be recognised as the common ground we share. There is an urgency to understand and feel what is going on in Islamic countries. Western countries must accept the failure of spreading freedom of speech. We have to encourage inter-religious harmony. Instead we have been blinded by our own political agendas. This is why we came together to have a discussion as debates are about raising opinions. “We must share the willingness to accept other people and that they may have different thoughts,” said Baroness Verma.

Sharing her background, Baroness Verma revealed she grew up in Leicester during a time when she was only one of two non-white students in her class. She grew up with Scottish and Irish neighbours claiming that broths and stews were consumed before curries. Sundays were spent in Sunday school in church to learn discipline. Her life has led to an exposure to different cultures and religions. As such this has led to the importance of using our human right of freedom of speech. “We need to be brave enough to challenge.” Religion never says you have to do crimes against people. During the question and answer session after the speakers, there was a lot of heat and a lot of insightful opinions from a great variety of attendees. Muslims, Hindus, Christians, all had much to share in such a limited amount of time. One thing for certain is that this event could have lasted for hours. Opinions were strong and challenged, this was a chance to observe and absorb the knowledge shared by others from all walks of life. Achieving peace, conflict resolution, recognising sensitivity, and the need for education were the subjects discussed repeatedly. Despite feeling out of place amongst the panel of speakers due to her status as an educator, Nicola Bailey unanimously had everyone agree that the core of us as individuals is our education.

We as humans, society, individuals have the responsibility to exercise self-censorship and the bravery to speak out against those who express hatred towards religions and beliefs. Here in the UK the law does not offer protection for religion so as the majority we have the task to control the minority. We are to eliminate the ignorance and the prejudice of freedom of speech today. We are one generation amongst many of the past and the future to come. We must come together as one to promote inter-religious harmony by making an imprint in our legacy by educating each other through understanding and acceptance. It is up to us to become role models for the youths of today and tomorrow.