



Maryam Namazie  
Campaign Spokesperson  
Telephone: +44 (0) 7719166731

BM Box 2387  
London WC1N 3XX, UK  
Email: onelawforall@gmail.com

## **It's time to take a stand against Islam and Sharia, Times, March 11, 2008**

**By Juliet Rix**

Picture this, says Maryam Namazie: "A child is swathed in cloth from head to toe every day. Everything but her face and hands are covered for fear that a man might find her attractive. At school she learns that she is worth less than a boy. She is not allowed to dance or swim or feel the sun on her skin or the wind in her hair. This is clearly unacceptable, yet it is accepted when it is done in the name of religion."

Namazie is the founder of the Council of Ex-Muslims in Britain (CEMB) which started life in the middle of last year. On Monday - in celebration of the centenary of International Women's Day - she spoke at a conference on Political Islam and Women's Rights, and launched a campaign against Sharia.

Iranian Muslim by birth, Namazie, 41, is friendly and softly spoken. But she does not mince her words. It takes nerve to start an organisation for people who have rejected Islam. In Islamic law, apostasy is punishable by death. Namazie receives periodic threats, usually on her mobile phone: "One said, 'You are going to be decapitated'...I went to the police. They were very attentive at first because they thought it might be linked to the attempted bombings in Glasgow. But when they realised it wasn't, they never bothered contacting me again." Doesn't she worry about her safety? "Yes, I do, frequently. I worry about whether I will live, especially now I am a mother. If I see someone looking at me strangely, I wonder." Why doesn't she use a pseudonym? "They can find out who you are anyway. And the point of the Council of Ex-Muslims is to stand up and be counted." She doesn't really like the label ex-Muslim and would prefer not to frame her identity in religious terms but, she says, it is like gays "coming out" 30 years ago: something has to become public if you are to break taboos. The CEMB has more than 100 members with inquiries from people who do not dare to join. "Some have horrendous stories but do not put them on the website because they are afraid."

Namazie's grandfather was a mullah and her father was brought up a strict Muslim. Both of her parents (now living in America) remain Muslim. When Namazie told her father about the launch of the CEMB, she remembers that he said: "Oh no, Grandpa is going to be turning in his grave." "So I told him that what I am doing benefits Muslims, too, because if you live in a secular society, you can be a Muslim, a Sikh, a Christian or an atheist and be treated equally." Namazie's opposition to state religion is informed by her own experience. She was 12 when the Iranian revolution "was hijacked by the Ayatollahs" and her country became the Islamic Republic of Iran.

"I had never worn the veil and was at a mixed school. Suddenly a strange man appeared in the playground. He was bearded and had been sent to separate the sexes - but we ran circles round him." She can still picture, too, the face of "the Hezbollah" who stopped her in the street because her head was uncovered. "I was 12 or 13. It was really scary." Worse happened to others: "There were beatings and acid was thrown in women's faces, and there were executions on television every day," she says. Then her school was closed "for Islamicisation".

Namazie and her mother left for India. They lived in a B&B in Delhi and Namazie attended the British School while her father and three-year-old sister remained in Tehran. This was meant to be a temporary measure, but soon her father - a journalist - decided that they all had to leave. The family spent a year in Bournemouth before travelling to the US where, when Namazie was 17, they were granted residency.

At university, she joined the United Nations Development Programme and went to work with Ethiopian refugees in Sudan. "Six months after I arrived Sudan became an Islamic state. I was, like, this is following me around!" Along with others, Namazie started an unofficial human rights organisation, gathering information on the government. The Sudanese security service called her in for questioning. "I wasn't very respectful and the UN guy who came with me said, 'No wonder your parents took you out of Iran'. The Sudanese guy threatened me, saying, 'you don't know what will happen to you. You might have a motorbike accident or something'." The UN quietly put her on a plane home.

This was a turning point, shifting her from non-practising Muslim to atheist. Two decades on, she is devoting her life to opposing religious power. She is in the midst of organising the first international conference of Ex-Muslims, to be held in London on October 10. And she is about to launch a "no Sharia" campaign.

She must have been shocked, I suggest, when the Archbishop of Canterbury said the introduction of some Sharia in Britain was unavoidable. No, she says; she wasn't even surprised. "It was quite apt, although he didn't expect the reaction he got. It was an attack on secularism really. It is, in a sense, to his benefit if there are Muslim schools and Sharia. It makes it less likely that anyone will oppose Christian schools and the privileged place of religion in society."

She is adamant, though, that no form of Sharia should be allowed here. "It is fundamentally discriminatory and misogynist," she says and is dismissive of the idea that people would be able to choose between Sharia and civil jurisdiction. Women could be railroaded into a Sharia court, she says. "This would hit people who need the protection of British law more than anyone else."

She believes that we are confused about the meaning of human rights. "Rights are for individuals, not for religions or beliefs. 'Every human is equal' does not mean that every belief is equal." Islamists portray themselves as victims, she says, and policymakers have bought into this. Namazie says that the Muslim Council of Britain should not be seen as representative of British Muslims - but would nonetheless welcome any opportunities to debate with it. "Ex-Muslims are in a good position to challenge political Islam," she says. "We must not let little girls or anyone else lose their human rights. We can't tolerate the intolerable for any reason - including religion."

[http://women.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life\\_and\\_style/women/the\\_way\\_we\\_live/article3530256.ece](http://women.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life_and_style/women/the_way_we_live/article3530256.ece)