

## [If all mankind minus one were of one opinion...](#) [1]

Written by [Sam Bowman](#) [2] | Tuesday 5 October 2010



*...and only one person were of the contrary opinion, mankind would be no more justified in silencing that one person than he, if he had the power, would be justified in silencing mankind.*

- *JS Mill, On Liberty.*

Geert Wilders? [trial](#) [3] in the Netherlands for allegedly inciting hatred against Muslims is a damning indictment of the state of free speech in that country. I strongly disagree with most of Mr Wilders? statements on Islam ? most of the problems associated with mass immigration could be resolved by limiting the welfare state?s privileges for migrants, and Mr Wilders also makes little distinction between his objection to the Islamic faith and to Islamic people themselves. This is unpleasant, but irrelevant. The law cannot pick and choose between the statements it likes and does not like, and nobody should be restricted from saying something simply because it is unpopular.

There are two reasons for this. The first and most important reason is a simple one of justice. Since Mr Wilders is not causing harm to anybody else by speaking critically of Muslims and Islam, it is unjust to punish him for his speech. The fundamental basis of a society in which people are free is the freedom of individuals to do what they want, so long as it doesn?t impede other people?s ability to do the same. The state steps in when those spheres of personal freedom inhibit each other. Clearly, Mr Wilders? speech, irrespective of what he has said, doesn?t affect anybody else?s freedom of action. To violate the principle of free speech in any case is to disregard the individual?s sphere of private liberty and it should not be done in any case.

The second reason to respect Mr Wilders? freedom of speech, even if you don?t believe in the intrinsic value of individual liberty, is that it would have highly negative consequences for society at large to disregard the principle of free speech. If the state is to judge the value of each statement on a case-by-case basis, it will prevent unpopular but potentially true things from being said. Few people knew better the importance of free speech than Socrates or Galileo: Arguments in favour of prosecuting Mr Wilders imply that the trials of people like these were flawed only in their use of evidence, not in their fundamental approach to speech. The truth is often unpopular, and the only way to ensure that society progresses is by protecting the rights of everybody to speak, no matter what they have to say.

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