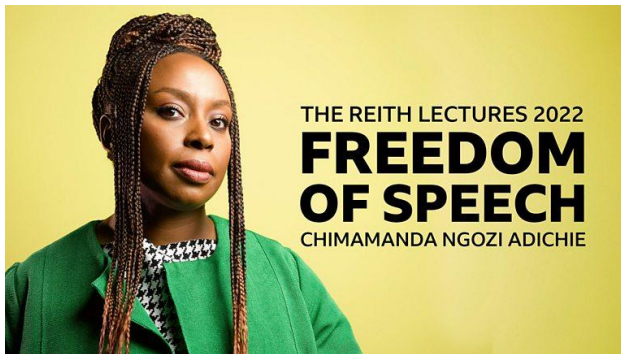


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## The Reith Lectures 2022: The Four Freedoms



### Lecture 1: Freedom of Speech

#### Central London

**ANITA ANAND:** Welcome to the Radio Theatre at Broadcasting House in Central London for the first of the 2022 BBC Reith Lectures. In this our centenary year, we're going to do things a little bit differently. Rather than just having one person give four lectures, we have four different thinkers giving one lecture each.

Now, this series is called The Four Freedoms and it's named after a speech given by President Franklin D Roosevelt in 1941, just months before America entered the Second World War. And in it, he set out what he deemed to be the "fundamental pillars of democratic

society: freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want and freedom from fear.” Now, more than 80 years on, we are asking, “What do these freedoms mean?”

We start with freedom of speech. Now, you don’t need me to tell you what a contentious subject that can be. In many Western societies arguments range about “cancel culture,” while in other parts of the world, people are locked up or even worse, for just saying what they think. Giving our first lecture is an internationally-acclaimed writer. I know you’re going to be very excited to hear what she has to say. She’s the winner of numerous awards for her fiction and her non-fiction. She’s been named as one of the world’s most influential thinkers. Her *The Danger of a Single Story* is among one of the most popular Ted Talks of all time.

Please join with me in welcoming **Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie**.

(AUDIENCE APPLAUSE)

**ANITA ANAND:** Chimamanda, you find yourself right in the middle of the freedom of speech debate. .the whole idea of freedom of speech has caught your imagination, has caught your passion and you talk about it a lot...?

**CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE:** I do. I do because I think it matters a lot to me but I think it also matters a lot to our future as the human race. But most of all, I’m a writer and I think that freedom of speech is essential if we are going to have literature. We cannot not have our human stories and I think the problems that we have with speech today are likely to – it’s almost sort of like the death knell of literary and other kinds of cultural production so that’s why I’m particularly interested.

**ANITA ANAND:** In my introductory remarks, I did say that here, it’s dominated freedom of speech debates by this idea of cancel culture but in other countries, you can actually lose your life. And we’re talking after the horrific attack on Salman Rushdie. I know

you're going to touch on that in your lecture but do you have a fear for your own safety because you are quite as outspoken as you are?

**CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE:** I will say no but it's – I'm going to temper that with, I might not necessarily be worried about my physical safety but I think that other kinds of safety, emotional safety, mental safety, and those concern me, yes.

**ANITA ANAND:** We're going to have a chance to ask you many more questions but for now, I would like to welcome you as our Reith Lecturer. The lectern is all yours.

(AUDIENCE APPLAUSE)

**CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE:** It's a bit disturbing to have people be forced to clap for me. And I'm sorry. Thank you all for being here. I'm really happy to be here and I'm happy that you're here.

It is a privilege for me to be here today to join in the distinguished tradition of the BBC Reith Lectures. When I was growing up in the 1980s on the campus of the University of Nigeria in Nsukka, I was a very curious child keen to hear every story, especially those that were no business of mine. And so, as a result, I sharpened very early on in life the skill of eavesdropping, a pastime at which I am still quite adept.

I noticed that each time my parents' friends visited, they would sit in the living room talking loudly, except for when they criticised the military government. Then, they spoke in whispers. That whispering, apart from testing my eavesdropping capabilities, was striking. Why speak in such hushed tones when in the privacy of our living room, drinking brandy, no less? Well, because they were so attuned to a punitive authoritarian government that they instinctively lowered their voices, saying words they dared not say in public.

We would not expect this whispering in a democracy. Freedom of expression is after all, the bedrock of open societies. But there are

many people in Western democracies today who will not speak loudly about issues they care about because they are afraid of what I will call, “social censure,” vicious retaliation, not from the government, but from other citizens.

An American student once accosted me at a book reading. “Why,” she asked angrily, “Had I said something in an interview?” I told her that what I had said was the truth, and she agreed that it was and then asked, “But why should we see it, even if it’s true?” At first, I was astonished at the absurdity of the question, then I realised what she meant. It didn’t matter what I actually believed. I should not have said it because it did not align with my political tribe. I had desecrated the prevailing orthodoxy. It was like being accused of blasphemy in a religion that is not yours. That young woman’s question, “Why should we say it, even if it’s true?” illustrates what the writer Ayad Akhtar has called a moral stridency, “a fierce, perhaps even punitive adherence to the collectively-sanctioned attitudes and behaviours of this era.”

To that, I would add, that this moral stridency is in fact, always punitive. We now live in broad settled ideological tribes. We no longer need to have real discussions because our positions are already assumed, based on our tribal affiliation. Our tribes demand from us a devotion to orthodoxy and they abide not reason, but faith. Many young people are growing up in this cauldron afraid to ask questions for fear of asking the wrong questions. And so, they practise an exquisite kind of self-censorship. Even if they believe something to be true or important, they do not say so because they should not say so.

One cannot help but wonder in this epidemic of self-censorship, what are we losing and what have we lost? We are all familiar with stories of people who have said or written something and then, faced a terrible online backlash. There is a difference between valid criticism, which should be part of free expression, and this kind of backlash, ugly personal insults, putting addresses of homes and children’s schools online, trying to make people lose their jobs.

To anyone who thinks, “Well, some people who have said terrible things, deserve it,” no. Nobody deserves it. It is unconscionable barbarism. It is a virtual vigilante action whose aim is not just to silence the person who has spoken but to create a vengeful atmosphere that deters others from speaking. There is something honest about an authoritarianism that recognises itself to be what it is. Such a system is easier to challenge because the battle lines are clear. But this new social censure demands consensus while being wilfully blind to its own tyranny. I think it portends the death of curiosity, the death of learning and the death of creativity.

No human endeavour requires freedom as much as creativity does. To create, one needs a kind of formless roving of the mind, to go nowhere and anywhere and everywhere. It is from that swell that art emerges. The German writer, Gunter Grass, once reflected on his writing process with these words: “The barriers fell, language surged forward, memory, imagination, the pleasure of invention.” As a writer, I recognised this intimately. As a reader, I have often felt the magic of literature, that sudden internal shiver while reading a novel, that glorious shock of mutuality, a sense of wonder that a stranger’s words could make me feel less alone in the world.

Literature shows us who we are, takes us into history, tells us not just what happened but how it felt and teaches us, as an American Professor once put it, about things that are “not googleable.” Books shape our understanding of the world. We speak of “Dickensian London.” We look to great African writers like Aidoo and Ngugi to understand the continent and we read Balzac for the subtleties of post-Napoleonic France.

Literature deeply matters and I believe literature is in peril because of social censure. If nothing changes, the next generation will read us and wonder, how did they manage to stop being human? How were they so lacking in contradiction and complexity? How did they banish all their shadows?

On a calm morning in New York this August, Salman Rushdie was attacked while just about to speak, ironically, on the freedom of speech. Imagine the brutal, barbaric intimacy of a stranger standing inches from you and forcefully plunging a knife into your face and your neck multiple times, because you wrote a book. I decided to re-read Rushdie's books, not only as an act of defiant support but as a ritualized reminder that physical violence in response to literature can never, ever be justified.

Rushdie was attacked because in 1989, after his novel, *The Satanic Verses* was published, the Iranian regime declared it offensive and condemned not just Rushdie but all his publishers, to death. Horrors, of course, then followed: His Italian translator was stabbed, his Norwegian publisher was shot, and his Japanese translator, Hitoshi Igarashi, was murdered in Tokyo. Here is a question I've been thinking about: would Rushdie's novel be published today? Probably not. Would it even be written? Possibly not.

There are writers like Rushdie who want to write novels about sensitive subjects, but are held back by the specter of social censure. Publishers are wary of committing secular blasphemy. Literature is increasingly viewed through ideological rather than artistic lenses. Nothing demonstrates this better than the recent phenomenon of "sensitivity readers" in the world of publishing, people whose job it is to cleanse unpublished manuscripts of potentially offensive words.

This, in my mind, negates the very idea of literature. We cannot tell stories that are only light when life itself is light and darkness. Literature is about how we are great and flawed. It is about what H. G. Wells has called 'the jolly coarseness of life.' To that I would add that just coarseness alone will do, it need not be jolly.

While I insist that violence is never an acceptable response to speech, I do not deny the power of words to wound. Words can break the human spirit. Some of the deepest pain I have experienced in my life have come from words that somebody said or wrote, and some of the most beautiful gifts I have received have also been words. It is

precisely because of this power of words that freedom of speech matters.

‘Freedom of speech.’ Even the expression itself has sadly taken on a partisan tribal tint. It is often framed, and I will put it crudely, as “say whatever you want” versus, “consider the feelings of others.” This, though, is too stark a dichotomy.

I cannot keep count of all the books that have offended me, infuriated me, disgusted me, but I would never argue that they not be published. When I read something scientifically false, such as that drinking urine cures cancer, or something gratuitously hurtful to human dignity, such as that gay people should be imprisoned for being gay, I desperately long to banish such ideas from the world. Yet I resist advocating censorship. I take this position as much for reasons of principle as for practicality.

I believe deeply in the principle of free expression, and I believe this particularly because I am a writer and a reader, and because literature is my great love and because I have been formed and inspired and consoled by books. Had any of those books been censored, I would perhaps today be lost.

My practical reason, we could also call it my selfish reason, is that I fear the weapon I advocate to be used against someone else might one day be used against me. What today is considered benign could very well become offensive tomorrow, because the suppression of speech is not so much about the speech itself, as it is the person who censors. American high school boards are today engaged in a frenzy of book banning, and the process seems arbitrary. Books that have been used in school curriculums for years with no complaints have suddenly been banned in some states, and I understand that one of my novels is in this august group.

I confess that there are some books I would fantasize about banning. Books that deny the Holocaust or the Armenian genocide, for example, because I detest the denial of history. But what if

someone else's fantasy was to ban a book about the Deir Yassin massacre of Palestinians by Zionists in 1948? Or a book about the Igbo coalminers massacred in Nigeria by the British colonial government in 1949? Above principle and pragmatism, however, is the reality that censorship very often does not achieve its objective. My first instinct, on learning that a book has been banned, is to seek it out and read it.

And so, I would say, do not ban them, answer them. In this age of mounting disinformation all over the world, when it is easy to dress up a lie so nicely that it starts to take on the glow of truth, the solution is not to hide the lie but to expose it, and scrub from it, its false glow. When we censor the purveyors of bad ideas, we risk making them martyrs, and the battle with a martyr can never be won.

I read newspapers from both sides of the political spectrum. I am, by the way, still puzzled that newspapers, ostensible bastions of objectivity, are politically differentiated. And I often say when I am feeling a little sanctimonious, that I am interested in the ideas of people who disagree with me because I believe that it is good to hear different sides of an issue. But the truth is that I am interested in their ideas because I want to understand them properly and therefore be better able to demolish them.

I believe that the answer to bad speech is more speech, and I recognize how simplistic, even flippant, that can sound. This is not to suggest that one should be allowed to say absolutely anything at any time, which to me is a juvenile position, for being fantastical and detached from reality. Free speech absolutism would be appropriate only for a theoretical world inhabited by animated ideas rather than humans.

Some speech restrictions are necessary in a civilized world. After the Second World War, when countries gathered to draft the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, most agreed that "incitement to violence," should be punished, but the Soviet Bloc wanted to add "incitement to hatred," citing the Nazis as an example, which on the



surface was reasonable. But their opponents suspected, rightly, that “incitement to hatred,” would end up being interpreted so widely as to include any criticism of the government.

This raises the question: who decides just how narrow and how clear restrictions should be? The nineteenth century English philosopher, John Stuart Mill, wrote that all silencing of discussion is an assumption of infallibility, and with all due respect to the Pope, nobody is infallible. So, who decides what should be silenced?

Mahatma Gandhi, after he was arrested for sedition, wrote: “Affection cannot be manufactured or regulated by law. If one has no affection for a person or system, one should be free to give the fullest expression to his disaffection, so long as he does not contemplate, promote or incite to violence.”

Most people would agree. But what about speech that does not directly incite violence but has nevertheless led to deaths by suicide, as has happened with people who are so harangued on social media, so insulted and abused, that they take their own lives? I, by the way, use the word ‘violence,’ assuming that its meaning is self-evident. But is it really? For what is to be said of the idea prevalent today that speech does not merely incite violence – the kind of physical act as suffered by Salman Rushdie – but that speech itself IS violence?

The expression, ‘the answer to bad speech is more speech,’ in its beguiling simplicity, also fails to consider a central motif, which is power. Who has access? Who is in a position to answer bad speech with more speech? In arguing for the freedom of speech, one must consider all the limitations placed by unequal power relations, such as a mainstream press owned by fewer and fewer wealthy people, which naturally excludes multiple voices.

Even the definition of speech can be limiting, such as when the US Supreme Court decided, in the case of Citizens United, that money is speech. All those not wealthy cannot then ‘answer back,’ as it were. Most of all, the Social Media companies, with their mystical

algorithms and their lack of transparency, exert enormous control on who can speak and who cannot, by suspending and censoring their users, something that has been called ‘moderation without representation.’

Yes, these companies are private but considering the outsize influence they have in modern society, they really should be treated more like a public utility. There are those who think that, because of these sorts of power limitations, we should robustly censor speech in order to create tolerance. A well-intentioned idea, no doubt. But as the Danish lawyer, Jacob Mchangama, has argued: “To impose silence and call it tolerance does not make it so. Real tolerance requires understanding. Understanding comes from listening. Listening presupposes speech.”

For all the nobility in the idea of censorship for the sake of tolerance, it is also a kind of capitulation, an acceptance that the wounded cannot fight back. When an anti-black poster was once displayed on the campus of Arizona State University, the university chose not to expel the perpetrators. Instead, a forum was organized, the poster discussed, and an overwhelming majority of students expressed their disapproval. One of the black students who organized this said, “When you get a chance to swing at racism, and you do, you feel more confident about doing it the next time.”

A troubling assumption underlying the idea of censorship for the sake of tolerance is that good people don’t need free speech, as they cannot possibly want to say anything hurtful to anyone. Free speech is therefore for the bad people who want it as a cover to say bad things. The culture of social censure today has, at its center, a kind of puritanism that expects us to be free of all flaws, like angels, and angels do not need free speech.

Of course, we all need free speech. Free speech is indeed a tool of the powerful, but it is also crucially the language of the powerless. The courageous protests by Iranian women, the ENDSARS protest in Nigeria, where young people rallied against police brutality, the Arab

Spring: all wielded speech. Dissent is impossible without the freedom of speech.

The biggest threat to speech today is not legal or political, but social. This is not a new idea, even if its present manifestation is modern. That famed chronicler of American life, Alexis de Tocqueville, believed that the greatest dangers to liberty were not legal or political, but social. And when John Stuart Mill warned against the “tyranny of the prevailing opinion and feeling,” it reads as though he foresaw the threat that orthodoxy poses today. The solution to this threat can only be collective action. Social censure creates not just a climate of fear but also a reluctance to acknowledge this fear. It is only human to fear a mob, but I would fear less if I knew my neighbor would not stay silent were I to be pilloried. We fear the mob but the mob is us.

I want to make a case today for moral courage, for each of us to stand for freedom of speech, to refuse to participate in unjustified censorship, and to make much wider, the boundaries of what can be said. We must start again to assume good faith. In public discourse today, the assumption of good faith is dead and speech is by default interpreted in the most uncharitable way. Yes, some people are not of good faith which, I suppose, is what that modern word “troll” means, but we cannot, because some people do not act in good faith, then decide that the principle of good faith itself is dead. It is instructive to be reminded of American President James Madison’s words: “some degree of abuse is inseparable from the proper use of everything.”

We must start again to make our case, respectfully and factually. We must agree that neither sanctimonious condescension on the left nor mean-spirited hectoring on the right qualify as political arguments. We must insist not only on truth but also nuance. An argument for any social justice movement, for example, is stronger and more confident when it is nuanced because it does not feel the need to simplify in order to convince.

We must hear every side and not only the loudest side. While social media has re-shaped the traditional power dynamic by giving some access to the powerless, it has also made it easy to mistake the loudest voices for the truest. We must protect the values of disagreement, and agree that there is value in disagreement. And we must support the principle of free expression when it does not appeal to our own agenda, difficult as that may be, and I find it particularly so.

We must wean ourselves of the addiction to comfort. When I first left Nigeria to attend university in the US, I quickly realized that in public conversations about America's difficult problems – like income inequality and race – the goal was not truth, the goal was to keep everyone comfortable. And so, people pretended not to see what they saw, things were left unsaid, questions unasked, and ignorance festered. This unwillingness to accept the discomfort that honesty can bring is in its own way a suppression of speech. Some Americans argue, for example, that students today should not be taught about the racist Jim Crow laws of the 1950s, because it will make them uncomfortable. And so, they prefer the disservice to young people of making them ignorant of their own history.

We must stop assuming that everyone knows, or should know, everything. I was once struck by how quickly an American journalist was fired from her job for saying something racist. Little was made public about exactly what it was she had said, and this not only gave a certain unearned power to her words, but also darkly suggested that perhaps they contained an element of truth. The public was also cheated of its right to hear, and perhaps, potentially learn. What was said? Why was saying it wrong? What should have been said instead?

We must demand that people behave on social media only as they would in real life, and we must also demand reasonable social media reforms such as the removal of anonymity, or linking advertising only to accounts with real names, which would provide an incentive to promote voices of actual people and not amoral bots.

What if each of us, but particularly those with voices, gatekeepers, opinion shapers, political and cultural leaders, editors, social media influencers, across the political spectrum, were to agree on these ideas as broad rules to follow? A coalition of the reasonable would automatically moderate extreme speech. Is it naïve? Perhaps. But a considered embrace of naivety can be the beginning of change. The internet was after all designed to create a utopia of human connection. A naïve idea if ever there was one, but it still brought about the most significant change in how human beings communicate.

Sometimes it takes a crisis for a naïve idea to become realistic. President Roosevelt's New Deal itself was based on ideas that went against the prevailing consensus of the time and were generally considered naïve and impossible. But when crisis came in the form of the Great Depression, it suddenly became possible.

Social censure is our crisis today. George Orwell wrote that, "If large numbers of people are interested in freedom of speech, there will be freedom of speech, even if the law forbids it." To that I would add: We can protect our future. We just need moral courage.

Thank you.

(AUDIENCE APPLAUSE)

**ANITA ANAND:** Chimamanda, thank you so much. One of those phrases just hangs in the air even as you come and sit down. 'Social censure is our crisis today.' And yet, you have spoken about de Tocqueville, you've spoken about Mill, you've spoken about the era of pitchforks and book-burning. Is it just that that is the way humanity is and we've just got bigger pitchforks and bigger bonfires now?

**CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE:** No. I think I have a fundamentally optimistic view of human nature. I think most people are fundamentally decent and there are just a few arseholes in the world. Oops. I guess I wasn't supposed to –

**ANITA ANAND:** Hey, I'm not censoring you.

**CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE:** So, no, and I think that to agree with that would in some ways, then mean that we would sort of have to think of this as something almost inevitable which then means that we give up. I believe in trying. I think things can be much better.

**ANITA ANAND:** I'm going to open this up to the floor now.. the first one here

**ARUA HIRSCH:** My name is Arua Hirsch. Thank you, Chimamanda, for your incredibly erudite lecture. In this era of followers and likes, self-censorship is a huge part of the challenge that we face and I'm curious how you protect yourself from internalising what you can anticipate the response to your freedom of creativity and speech is in your work, and how you find the courage to follow the ideas that you have regardless of the potential consequences for those who follow you and those who want and expect you to maintain a certain line?

**CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE:** When I'm writing fiction, I do not think about audience. And it's so important to me because there is something when my fiction is going well, which doesn't happen as often as I would like, it's magical. I feel transported and suspended and it's just the most joyous thing for me, which is why fiction is the love of my life. I'm thinking about character and emotion and human motivation and all of those things.

And when I teach fiction to young people, I tell them that as well, which is do not think about anybody because you're going to censor yourself and your story is then going to be false. I think in particular fiction, literature storytelling, if we're going to participate in it, I think that we have a huge responsibility to the truth. And so, if you're not willing to kind of live up to that responsibility to the truth, then you really have no business writing fiction.

But at the same time, I don't want to pretend as though I don't know that books are now read differently. It's no longer just about my uncle reading a sex scene and thinking, how does she know that, and I do have uncles who think that and I'm 45 years old. But it's also that sometimes people then read a character that you've written and they attribute a character's ideas to you, the writer and, you know, I still do not think that that's a reason not to write.

When I am writing non-fiction, which is an entirely different thing for me, I am very much aware of what I want to achieve with non-fiction. I'm aware of who I imagine my audience is because often when I write pieces that are non-fiction, I'm usually trying to persuade someone. For example, I wrote something about feminism and when I was writing it, I was very clear that I was trying to get a few more people to start to recognise the full humanity of women. And to do that meant that I thought my audience but I did not think about the people who would hate it. I thought about the people who I might convince.

And when you talk about likes, the age of clicks and likes, it helps to stay away from social media. I think especially when one is immersed in the creative processes, stay away. It's really important. Stay away. Maybe when you're done with the novel, then go back.

**ANITA ANAND:** Let's take another question. Let's start over here.

**HARRY MILLER:** My name is Harry Miller. I represent the Bad Law Project and an organisation called Fair Cop. The police define hate in this country as dislike and antagonism. My response to that is to speak freely of that which I dislike and to be as antagonistic as is humanly possible while staying on the right side of the law. By the police's own definition, I engage in hate speech. Is this wise?

**CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE:** I think both are unwise.

**HARRY MILLER:** Really?

**CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE:** Yes.

**HARRY MILLER:** Okay.

**ANITA ANAND:** Just explain why.

**CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE:** Well, first of all, obviously, I think in the case of the police, I just do not believe that you can legislate affection. I don't think that we can – and I don't even want to be the recipient of affection that has been legislated. However, I also think that it is profoundly childish to then decide that, because someone says – if you said to me that you talk about what you dislike because you want to talk about what you dislike – I think I would respect that. But to say, my response is then to talk about what I dislike, I think life is short, maybe you should just do something that you actually enjoy.

(AUDIENCE APPLAUSE)

**HARRY MILLER:** But if you're doing it not for the sake of being dislikeable but because you take the view you either use it or you lose it, because I think that if we don't speak out about what we think is true and we don't say things which the government, the police, will class as hate speech, then that self-censorship closes the Overton window and it shuts down that which is permissible and therefore, I think we have an obligation to speak.

**ANITA ANAND:** Okay.

**CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE:** I think this sort of view is very alienating. And there are already people who are doing those things and I suppose maybe, it's also for me, a question of what are we talking about. So, in talking about what you dislike, what do we mean? Are we saying then, that to prove a point, you go to the



streets and say, “Women are inferior,” and, “Black people should be killed.” I mean, what are we talking about because I think it also matters.

**ANITA ANAND:** Okay.

**HARRY MILLER (from back of room):** No. Not that.

**ANITA ANAND:** Okay, not that, said the gentleman in the audience and few from the stage.

**CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE:** Thank goodness.

**ANITA ANAND:** Over here. Yes, David Baddiel.

**DAVID BADDIEL:** Hello. Yes, I’m David Baddiel. I’m a writer and comedian.

To put the other side of it, which I think we’re all aware of as writers and whatever, on social media, there are a lot of people who, seeing it as they do as some kind of prime motivator of social justice – which it can be– they, I think, would say that what’s actually happening when someone says something and are then all piled on and abuse happens to them, that that is consequences, that there is some kind of freedom of play of their speech and the actions that pushback against them, as if what we’re looking at here is a kind of unbridle democracy and people are just answering back.

What I think that ignores is that what we’re talking about is a performative space. It’s a performative space and people behave dysfunctional in a performative space. And what you get with that notion that it’s just people answering is, an ignoring of the madness of crowds, of tribal identity, of the need to perform and also, of the way the algorithm works, which is to attract people to watch hatred and to watch shaming.

But I wondered what you thought about that notion of “it’s just consequences” and that when people are attacked in the way they are, they should have been more careful, they should have expected it, and what that does in the end to how freedom of speech might work, because the notion of that in your head that that is waiting for you, is always, I think, going to hold you back?

**CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE:** Not if you refuse. The one thing I want to say, and in some ways, you allude to that already, is that social media is not real life. But it, nevertheless, has consequences for people in real life. So, it’s a really strange thing and I think, so new for us as a human civilisation. And as to the question of consequence, the one thing I think about is often, there isn’t a sense of proportion. I’ve always found that really shocking.. you read about someone who has been piled on and then, you go find out what they said and you think, really?

I guess for me the thing is what’s the point? Because if we are saying that it’s about consequences, then I think we need to think in the larger sense about what kind of society we’re creating. So, if we’re going to answer bad speech with this sort of piling on that has real consequences for people, what society do we want to live in, I think is the question. I don’t want to live in a society where, even if someone has said something I really dislike, that person’s child suddenly is in danger. I don’t want to live in that kind of world. Surely, we can find an alternative way to frame this idea of consequences.

**ANITA ANAND:** Another question, a forest of hands going up..

**TALIA RANDALL:** My name is Talia Randall. I’m a writer and podcaster. My question is about how we, for lack of a better phrase, practise free speech in daily life. We’ve talked a lot about how we’re doing it badly on social media but I work a lot with young people in an extra-curricular way, so normally doing stuff around sensitive subjects like abuse or racism, big things. And in the past couple of years, I’ve noticed that that work is getting a little bit harder, partly because I think, of young people seeing stuff online and that entering

the space, but also, just because of the other pressures of school and life and society and everything, it's become less of a priority. So I guess I'm wondering how you think we should practise it on a more micro, daily way. How do you do it in the classroom, for instance?

**CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE:** I teach a writing workshop in Nigeria. So, the first thing I do is I tell them, that expression, "safe space" has been made fun of and with good reason. But I do tell them that it's a safe space but I define for them what I mean, which is that everybody in this room gets to have an equal voice.

You can disagree but you do not shut them down. And the second thing I do is I have everyone go around and talk about something really stupid that they've done or something they're really ashamed of. And often, I start with myself. And I find that it works because what it does is that it reminds us, we're all sort of muddling along and trying to get it right and we don't know everything so I find that it generally works. Sometimes, the people who are very upset with me, at one of the years that I was teaching the workshop, this young man had written a story that portrayed women kind of like Philip Roth, really sort of simplified and misogynistic.

And so, he was reading the story and then, a young woman started expressing her disapproval in rather loud terms and I stopped her, and she was upset because again, she's in my tribe. I actually dislike that story, but I felt that that was not the way to express that dislike because what would happen to that young man is that he would sort of go off in a huff and say, "Well, they didn't even let me read my story because they know that it's true," and that sort of nonsense. And so, I thought no, let him talk, let him talk and then afterwards, let's very calmly demolish the story.

**ANITA ANAND:** A question here...

**MATT D'ANCONA:** Yes, hello. I'm Matt D'Ancona. I'm from Tortoise Media. You were operating in a hyper-modern, hyper-technologized landscape in your lecture but it was very striking that

some of the metaphorical language which you invoked, a lot of it was quasi-religious. You talked about blasphemy. You talked about infallibility. You talked about puritanism. And I think this gets us to the nub of something but I am curious to hear what you think that might be, which is that the social censorship culture you describe is surprisingly, a kind of quasi-religious phenomenon. And it has its own version of providence in the notion that there is a direction to history and it has its notion of revealed truth in the notion that everything is obvious. But I am fascinated to know why you think this has arisen at this particular moment?

**CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE:** You've put it so beautifully. Thank you. I wonder whether it has something to do with social media, maybe. Because again, I really do think that social media, we humans just have never encountered anything like social media. We just haven't. I don't know. And maybe, a generous reading would be that maybe people are so overwhelmed that they retreat into very simplified religious ideas about life. I really don't know. But whatever the hell causes it, we need to undo it.

**NITA:** Hey, my name is Nita and one question that you provoked at the beginning was around speaking the truth. But the truth as we know, is rather inconveniently subjective so when somebody believes in a truth that they genuinely believe is the truth and yet, that denies someone else's truth, what do we do in that scenario? To take an example, in the UK at the moment, one view that is very much advocated by some very prolific writers and perhaps, some people in this very audience, is that trans people should not exist.

Or the example that you brought, that women are inferior. When someone's truth denies my truth and it does not only provoke discomfort or offend my feelings but rather, wants to erase my very existence, what do you think is the morally courageous thing, but also, compassionate thing to do?

**ANITA ANAND:** Thank you.

**CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE:** I don't agree that truth is subjective. So, the two examples that you give, it is in fact not true that women are inferior. It is also not true that trans people don't exist. I think there is a difference between saying that truth is subjective and saying that opinion is subjective.

**ANITA ANAND:** Many of these things have become political battlefields. I mean, I know you want to come back on that but is there – the left will say, “The right is shutting us down.” The right will say, “The left is screaming us out of existence.” Who is at fault more, do you think?

**CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE:** Oh, the right.

(AUDIENCE APPLAUSE)

**CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE:** But I do want to come back and I'll tell you why. I think it's because the left – and I mentioned it – there is a kind of condescension. It seems to me that many people on the left in Western countries today, think that a superior sneer is an argument. So, if somebody doesn't agree with you and you do not want to make your case but you just sneer at them, it seems to me – and that's terrible – but it seems to me that on the right, there is something even more insidious.

It's more than a sneer. There is a refusal in some parts of the right to acknowledge basic things about humanity and I think some of the arguments are arguments that one makes if you do not know actual human beings. And for me, a person who loves human beings, it's just very off-putting but I will still read them.

**ANITA ANAND:** And you wanted to come back on that point of some things are merely true?

**CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE:** I did want to also comment about the language that you use where you say, do not want trans people to exist. It seems to me sometimes, and again, I think social

media contributes to this, that we choose the most extreme and often, the most inaccurate understanding of people's positions. So, for women, for example, who say that they want sports to remain sex-based rather than gender identity-based, people will say, "Oh, you want trans people to die." No, they don't. They have trans friends. They know trans people exist. They're just saying, "This is the position we have."

And so, the reason I say this is, I think it's helpful for us not to do that sort of very extreme, often inaccurate representation of people's opinions because if we do that, we're never going to have any kind of understanding or agreement.

(AUDIENCE APPLAUSE)

**ANITA ANAND:** We'll take a question from over here, yes.

**ARSENI SOKOLOV:** Hello, my name is Arsenii Sokolov. I'm half Russian, half Ukrainian. And first of all, I want to say thank you for this discussion. It's amazing that it can happen here and I really appreciate it. Most of my life, I've lived in Russia where such luxury as freedom of speech can lead to your imprisonment, torture and all those horrible things. And this self-censorship, in Russia, was built for generations, for centuries and decades and came to that level that people are not just scared to speak freely. Do you think the need of freedom can overweight and overcome fear?

**CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE:** Yes. To answer your question quite simply, yes. Yes, I have a lot of faith in the resilience of the human spirit. I think that there are many people in Russia who continue to defy this stifling, not just of speaking but of thinking. And they do that by thinking. And at the same time, of course, I recognise that it's not easy. And so, I think that a lot of my time was focused obviously on what's happening in the – really in the US because often, a lot of these ridiculous things originate in America.

And then, because Western Europe doesn't have enough confidence not to take on issues that really do not concern them, they sort of take it on the – before you know it, everybody in West Europe and the US are talking about the same things. So, in some ways, my thing is focused on that because I think obviously, the other, and I would say bigger, issues of speech in other parts of the world are in Russia, in Saudi Arabia, in Nigeria. Thank you for being here.

(AUDIENCE APPLAUSE)

**ANITA ANAND:** We have got time for one last question and the hands shoot up now...

**EMEKA OKAFOR:** Hello. My name is Emeka Okafor. I'm an actor. I would like a little bit of practical advice. I am a sensitive person and I am okay with that now because it makes me a good mum and it makes me good at my job. I have been on the receiving end of public shaming online. I have a love-hate relationship with Instagram. Sometimes, I think it's beautiful. Sometimes, I find it unsafe and I'm trying to use it for work.

I have a couple of things coming out next year where I feel like, because of the kind of characters I'm portraying, I might be at the receiving end of dangerous chat. I already know there are some things that make me, that replenish me. The countryside is one of them. I was just wondering if, when you see things online that are aimed at you that hurt you, are there a couple of things that you do or that you tell yourself?

**CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE:** I think it's so lovely that you said that you recognise the things that replenish you. I think it's so important. It's so important. Well, I think the first thing to say is that I embrace a sparkling cowardice, which is to say that I do not see those things on social media because I don't look. And so, I am on Instagram but actually – maybe this is where I can give out my secret – I send pictures to my assistant, she decides what goes on.

Sometimes, I send her the captions. I don't even know my Instagram password.

So, if you have a dear friend who you trust, someone you love, maybe they could do that for you. I really, really think that there is only so much of that kind of thing that a human being can take. I just do not believe in this idea that we should somehow thicken our skins and become crocodiles and take it on. No. And you're a creative person. You need to protect your creativity and your spirit and your art. And the way to do that, I think, is to use social media only when you have to.

Do not ever – this is advice I got from my dear friend, Dave Eggers many, many years ago. He said, “You're really getting very big, aren't you? Do not ever search for yourself online.” The last time I searched for myself was after *Purple Hibiscus*, so 2013. I never have and I never will. There is no point.

(AUDIENCE APPLAUSE)

**CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE:** Oh, can I just add something?

**ANITA ANAND:** Sure. Yes, go.

**CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE:** But if there are things that I really need to hear about, I have loved ones who tell me. But we've had to manage the telling because you know the times when they tell you things you don't need to know? So, my thing is, unless it's absolutely necessary, so if it's something that you think will infuriate me, then I need to know. Which is why I was informed that there were people who said that they were happy that my parents had died so that infuriated me.

**ANITA ANAND:** You could hear the applause. It is radio. What you cannot hear is the enormous numbers of heads which were nodding throughout so much of what you said. We could go on for twice the length of this program. But for now, we have run out of



time. Next time, we're going to be in Swansea in South Wales to hear from the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, on freedom of worship. Is political freedom ultimately based on religious liberty? That's next time but for now, a big thank you to our audience here in London, a very special thank you though, to our first Reith Lecturer of 2022, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie.

(AUDIENCE APPLAUSE)

END OF TRANSCRIPT