

## **Free Speech and Universities**

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Religions offer membership. They fill the void in the human heart with the mystical presence of the group, and if they do not provide this benefit they will wither and die, like the religions of the ancient world during the Hellenistic period. It is therefore in the nature of a religion to protect itself from rival groups and the heresies that promote them.

Today's university students have little time for religion, and no time at all for exclusive groups. They are particularly insistent that distinctions associated with their inherited culture – between sexes, classes and races, between genders and orientations, between religions and life-styles – should be rejected, in the interests of an all-comprehending equality that leaves each person to be who she really is. 'Non-discrimination' is the orthodoxy of our day. And yet this seeming open-mindedness is just as determined to silence the heretic as any established religion.

There may be no knowing in advance how the new heresies might be committed, or what exactly they are, since the ethic of non-discrimination is constantly evolving to undo distinctions that were only yesterday part of the fabric of reality. When Germaine Greer made the passing remark that, in her opinion, women who regarded themselves as men were not, in the absence of a penis, actually members of the male sex, the remark was judged to be so offensive that a campaign was mounted to prevent her speaking at the university of Cardiff. The campaign was not successful, partly because Germaine Greer is the person she is. But the fact that she

had committed a heresy was unknown to her at the time, and probably only dawned on her accusers in the course of practising that morning's 'two minute hate'.

More successful was the campaign to punish Sir Tim Hunt, the Nobel Prize winning biologist, for making a tactless remark about the difference between men and women in the laboratory. A media-wide witch-hunt led Sir Tim to resign from his professorship at University College London; the Royal Society (of which he is a fellow) went public with a denunciation, and he was pushed aside by the scientific community. A lifetime of distinguished creative work ended in ruin.

The ethic of non-discrimination tells us that women are as adapted to a scientific career as men are. I don't know whether that is true, but I doubt that it is, and Sir Tim's tactless remark suggested that he does not believe it either. How would I find out who is right? Surely, by weighing the competing opinions in the balance of reasoned discussion. Truth arises by an invisible hand from our many errors, and both error and truth must be permitted if the process is to work. Heresy arises, however, when someone questions a belief that must not be questioned from within a group's favoured territory. The favoured territory of radical feminism is the academic world, the place where careers can be made and alliances formed through the attack on male privilege. A dissident within the academic community must therefore be exposed, like Sir Tim, to public intimidation and abuse, and in the age of the Internet this punishment can be amplified without cost to those who inflict it.

This process of intimidation ought to cast doubt, in the minds of reasonable people, on the doctrine that inspires it. Why protect a belief that stands on its own two feet? The intellectual frailty of the feminist

orthodoxy is there for all to see, in the fate of Sir Tim. Indeed, University College London and the Royal Society displayed, in their refusal to protect Sir Tim from the cloud of twittering morons, the sad state of the academic world today, which is losing all sense of its role as guardian of the intellectual life. As Jonathan Haidt has eloquently argued, at the very moment when universities are advocating diversity as a fundamental academic value – meaning by ‘diversity’ all that I have included under the term ‘non-discrimination’ – the true diversity for which a university should make a stand, namely diversity of opinion, has been steadily eroded and in many places destroyed entirely.

Traditional education had much to say about the art of not giving offence. Modern education has a lot more to say about the art of taking offence. This, in my experience, has been one of the achievements of gender studies, which has shown students how to take offence at behaviour, at words, at pronouns, at institutions, customs and even at facts, whenever ‘gender identity’ is in question. It did not take much education to make old-fashioned women take offence at the presence of a man in the women’s bathroom. But it takes a lot of education to teach a woman to take offence at a women’s bathroom from which males who ‘self-identify’ as women are excluded.

In similar spirit students today are being encouraged to demand ‘safe spaces’, where their carefully nurtured vulnerabilities will not be ‘triggered’ into crisis. The correct response to this, which is to invite students to look for a safe space elsewhere, is not one that universities seem to consider, since after all each student is an addition to the income account, and censorship costs nothing.

It is my belief that an institution in which the truth can be impartially sought, without censorship, and without penalties imposed on those who disagree with the prevailing orthodoxy, is a social benefit beyond anything that can now be achieved by controlling permitted opinion. If the university renounces its calling in the matter of truth-directed argument then it becomes a centre of indoctrination without a doctrine, a way of closing the mind without the great benefit that is conferred by religion, which also closes the mind, but closes it around a real moral community.