

Freedom of Speech and Right to Offend

Transcript of a proposition put to the members of *The Oxford Union Society* on March 5, 2015 at Oxford University:

Thank you very much.

Seven hundred years ago, if someone had come to Oxford¹ and stood here and said “I think everyone should be allowed to read the *Bible*, even peasants”, that person would have been described as offensive. He would have been denounced, shouted at and eventually no-platformed. That was certainly the
5 experience of John Wycliffe. In 1382 he was banished from Oxford for among other things translating the *Bible* into English. His work was described as an offense against the ecclesiastical order.

Two hundred years ago, if someone had come to Oxford and stood here and said “I don’t believe in God”, that person would have been described as offensive. He would have been ridiculed, yelled at. That was
10 certainly the experience of Shelley², who in 1811 was banished from Oxford for writing a pamphlet called “The Necessity of Atheism”. One historical account describes how Shelley’s pamphlet caused maximum offense. It describes how fellows and students at New College swept the pamphlets up and disposed of them – much like today’s students sweep up copies of the *Sun*, which they also describe as causing maximum offense.

One hundred years ago, if someone had come to Oxford and stood here and said “I think a man should be
15 allowed to have sex with another man”, that person would have been described as offensive. He would have been booed, hissed at, no-platformed. That was certainly the experience of *The Chameleon*, an openly gay Oxford magazine, which in 1894 survived for one issue only. Why? Because it was offensive. One observer described it as “an insult to the animal creation” and said it would have a dangerous influence. In other words, it made Oxford an unsafe space, and it had to be stopped – much as today’s student leaders
20 ban lads’ mags in the name of preserving safe spaces for students.

So when today’s student leaders clamp down on offensive stuff, they are actually carrying on a very long tradition – a tradition whereby the *crème de la crème* of British society take it upon themselves to police the parameters of acceptable thought and to exclude offensiveness from the academy³.

Throughout history the church, politicians, universities have always branded certain ideas offensive and
25 have waged war against them. Today student leaders do the same. They carry out one of the oldest, foulest forms of intolerance, intolerance of anyone who gives offense. But giving offense is good. In fact, it is essential. Humans have long had the urge to offend against the natural order, the religious order, the moral order – and in the process, they have pushed humanity forward. In fact, pretty much every leap forward in history, pretty much every freedom we enjoy, is a product of individuals having given offense, having
30 offended against the orthodoxies of their age.

Offensiveness is not just something we have to begrudgingly accept. Offensiveness is the motor of human progress.

¹ Oxford University

² Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822), English romantic poet

³ further education, e.g. universities

Copernicus offended Christians when he said the sun was at the centre of the universe. He really hurt them. And in the process, he made the world a better, more understandable place.

35 John Wilkes, the 18th century radical journalist, offended everyone. He packed his newspapers with sex and lies and stories about bishops buggering their maids and so on and so on. And in the process, through his struggles with the authorities, he gave birth to press freedom.

The newspaper “Gay News” caused profound offense to Christians in 1976 when it published a poem about a Roman centurion giving Jesus Christ a blowjob. And in the process, in its struggles with the authorities, it
40 started a debate about the blasphemy laws, which eventually led to the abolition, expanding freedom of speech for all of you, for everyone.

[Audience: “Question?”]

No! The right to offend...

[Audience laughter]

45 The right to offend, the right to offend, is not some pesky little part of freedom of speech that we have to put up with, it is the heart and soul and lungs of freedom of speech. It is the coursing lifeblood of human progress. It is the instigator of liberty and modernity and science and understanding. What a laughing stock today’s student leaders are that they can so casually dismiss the right to be offensive, without realising that their lovely, enlightened lives are the gift of individuals who gave offense. The gift of scientists, thinkers,
50 agitators who bravely showed their arses to the dominant ideas of their era. Their offensiveness made you free.

I know what some student leaders will say: “Oh, but our ‘no platforming’ is about protecting individuals, we only want to protect women from misogyny and black students from racism, so our intolerance is progressive”. Please, how progressive is it to say that female students are so fragile that they can’t cope
55 with seeing a pair of tits in the *Sun* – no! – without falling apart.

[Audience: “Free speech, free speech...”]

[Audience laughter]

That doesn’t sound, that doesn’t sound, progressive to me, that sounds paternalistic. How progressive is it to say that black students need these wise, white student leaders to protect them from harmful ideas
60 because that doesn’t sound progressive to me, that sounds neo-colonialist.

[Audience applause]

The fact... The fact is today’s student leaders aren’t protecting individuals – they are protecting an idea, and it is the most mainstream status-quo idea of the 21st century, the idea of human vulnerability. The poisonous notion that humans are fragile [*ding indicating allotted time almost used up*] and therefore our
65 speech and our relations must be monitored and policed. It is this misanthropic, orthodox idea that they promote and which they protect from criticism as surely as priests once ring-fenced their beliefs from ridicule.

In this choking climate, we have got to move beyond talking about a right to offend. We have to talk about a duty to offend.

70 [Audience murmur]

Anyone who cares...

[Audience laughter]

75 Anyone who cares for freedom, anyone who believes that humanity only progresses through being daring and disrespectful, now has a duty to rile and stir and outrage. A duty to break out of the new, grey conformism. A duty to ridicule the new guardians of decency. A duty to tell them: Fuck your orthodoxies!

Thank you.

[Audience applause]

(2015)