

Freedom

I'm writing this in the midst of the furore concerning the forced resignation of Sir Tim Hunt. He is the Nobel Prize winning biologist who stirred up a twitter storm when he made some silly, sexist remarks at the World Conference of Science Journalists in South Korea. It's a case which gives concern. University College London, one of the institutions from which Sir Tim had to resign, was founded in the name of free speech. At the beginning of the C19, the only universities in England were Oxford and Cambridge and you had to belong to the Church of England to graduate from either of them. UCL was founded so that people who did not conform could nevertheless become members of a university. It is alarming if UCL is now attempting to set limits to what people can say and still take part in academic discourse.

Some people have said that Sir Tim should be reinstated because what he said was not as bad as was first reported and he has apologised. This is probably true, but it's missing the point. Freedom of speech is not freedom to say what most people regard as acceptable. Neither is it freedom to say what the establishment approves of. Freedom of speech is the freedom to say whatever you believe, even if you are being offensive, if you are being stupid, even if you are wrong. Freedom of speech must include the freedom to be racist, sexist and homophobic, as well as freedom to insult somebody's religion or politics. Otherwise it is not freedom of speech. We have to be able to say with Voltaire *I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it.*

But why? Why should people be allowed to get away with offending other people? Why should they be free to say what is unacceptable? Why should we be free to be silly or just plain wrong? Three reasons spring to mind.

1) The human rights of the person speaking. What are you going to do with people who insist on saying what society regards as unacceptable? Sack them from their jobs? Fine them? Imprison them? Torture them? Burn them at the stake? It's all been done in the past to people who have insisted on their right to speak the truth as they see it.

2) If you try to suppress ideas, other people start wondering what you've got to hide. Official secrecy is fertile ground for conspiracy theorists. *If we're not allowed to discuss Roswell, what do they know that they don't want us to know?*

3) Most importantly, whilst the oddball is probably generally wrong, you don't need to know much history to know that sometimes they are right and the majority of "right-thinking" people and the establishment are the ones who are wrong. Columbus insisted that the world wasn't flat, when many people thought it was. Luther stood up to corruption in the Mediaeval Church, despite its wealth, power and hold on the popular imagination. Galileo insisted that the earth goes round the sun, not the sun round the earth. Nelson Mandela stood out against apartheid. On the other hand, the crowds were wrong when they set free the murderer Barabbas and crucified the innocent Jesus. The Nuremberg rallies were wrong in supporting Hitler. It now looks as if the scientific establishment that told us to stop eating fatty foods for the sake of our health were at least in part wrong. If we eat less fat, we eat more sugar (in processed foods as well as in what we make ourselves), which is far worse for us.

If we want Truth to prevail, the way to do it is not to make it illegal to say certain things (e.g. to deny the holocaust in which the Nazis murdered millions of Jews and other people they despised). Neither is it to sack from their jobs, to fine, imprison, or otherwise persecute dissenters. It is not even to ostracise people with unpopular views. If we want the Truth to prevail, the way to do it is to examine the evidence in the light of reason, to publish the evidence, and to debate the evidence freely and openly. All this should be uncontroversial in an enlightened society. I am, however, going to go one step further and say what might be controversial - that we should examine the evidence rationally and prayerfully if we want to know the Truth. Faith and reason are not, as is often supposed, opposites. Faith seeks understanding. Faith guides us towards understanding. Jesus is the Logos (divine reason) and it is logical to pray if you really want to know the Truth. Roger.

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