

Faith in the Academy: Religion at University

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Recently universities have found themselves torn between upholding values of academic freedom, of free speech and expression on campus, and pandering to a new orthodoxy that defines students as vulnerable adults and likely to be 'damaged' by contrary opinions. This has been most marked when it comes to issues of faith and students' religious identity and beliefs. This chapter considers the contradictory position universities find themselves in, on one hand seeking to protect students' religious sensibilities by sanctioning illiberal practices and restricting criticism, and on the other seeking to limit freedom of expression by banning certain faith speakers in the fear they will 'radicalise' vulnerable students. It will reflect on the troubled relationship between religion and the academy, especially as the current government seeks to conscript universities and their staff in surveillance over the thoughts and leanings of their students. This is not simply a case of academic freedom under attack, it is more fundamental and far reaching. The current troubled relationship between religion and universities is a manifestation of something far more serious: that we as a society have lost faith in the academy.

Religion in the Academy

Religion might have an ambivalent presence on university campuses nowadays but faith and the academic tradition have a long history. From the medieval monasteries of Europe that instituted the education of monks and priests to the heyday of Islamic scholarship that saw the establishment of Baghdad's House of Wisdom (Lyons 2009), Christianity and Islam both acted as catalysts in transmitting ancient philosophical traditions and building on them. It was in the interface between theology and rational enquiry that academic scholarship thrived.

The subsequent separation between religion and the university could be seen as the inevitable result of empirical rationality and the ascent of scientific enquiry. Religion lost its important place in the academy becoming either a purely personal matter or a subject for study in theology degrees (Wuthnow, 2007). However the continuing divide between faith as represented by religion and reason as represented by the academy is not simply a matter of secularism taking over from belief. It has more to do with social and political shifts than with a natural antipathy between science and religion. These days it is common to see frequent headlines linking religion with universities, not because religious scholarship is adding to the wealth of their intellectual capital, but because religion is seen as an insidious interloper posing real threats to the academy and its intellectual freedoms.

The ambiguous role religion has come to play in the life of the academy came about initially as universities sought to accommodate an increasingly multi-cultural student body. Along with other Muslim students in the 1980s, I lobbied my university for prayer facilities. The request was for purely practical needs, a space where we could conduct our daily and Friday prayers. We were helped by the ascendance of multicultural awareness and policies. In time religious societies proliferated and it is now common to find prayer rooms in almost all campuses.

But that welcome accommodation of students' religious requirements soon became an acceptance and subsequently an endorsement of illiberal practices. The gender segregation within religious observance eventually crossed the threshold of the prayer room into the seminar room. Functions and talks organised by some religious societies required gender segregated seating. This was rarely challenged, and when it was, universities justified allowing such practices out of respect for the

students' identity and beliefs. The ascendance of identity politics and the fear of being branded racist were the main drivers behind an almost unquestioning acceptance of almost any behaviour that students claimed was a manifestation of their religious identity, however spurious that claim.

Religion and the undermining of academic freedom

Cultural essentialism has thus become one of the orthodoxies that has permeated contemporary universities in the UK. It means that students see it as their right to reject any idea they deem contrary to their faith, and feel justified in doing so. In this ubiquitous therapeutic culture that brands students as vulnerable and in need of protection from potential offence, the emotional and personal has taken precedence over the intellectual. This is not restricted to the policies for student satisfaction but has filtered down to the very pedagogy of higher education where our teaching is meant to entertain rather than challenge students and where we must issue trigger warnings lest the content of our lectures causes them undue distress. Students are already primed from university marketing and induction material to expect their views to hold sway and that the function of all who work at the university is to meet their needs. Nowhere are the new recruits inducted into the concept and practice of academic freedom. We tell them we will listen to their voice when they speak but rarely teach them that they must allow others the same freedom.

When it comes to universities, the relationship between lecturers and students, the content of what is taught and how, and even the administrative running of the university, are now defined by policy edicts and subject to regulation. Nowhere is state encroachment more demarcated than with the issue of religion on campus. If religion poses any threat to academic freedom it is in two ways, both external to religion but exemplified by these two statements: 'You can't say that, it offends me' and 'You can't say that, it's dangerous'.

As students' cultural identities and their 'voice' becomes paramount and unassailable within universities, they've increasingly come to see their views as taking precedence over academic principles including academic freedom. This is especially true when these views can be justified with recourse to the label of religious belief. Even scientific knowledge and facts are subject to the belief test. In a widely-reported incident in November 2011 over one hundred university students, some of them medics, walked out of a lecture on evolution at University College London (*Daily Mail*, 2011). They claimed that the teaching of evolution contradicted their faith and asserted their right not to be taught it.

The story and the reaction to it illustrate how faith in the academy as a place for engaging in a battle of all ideas is being undermined. The students felt that the ideas presented, regardless of the fact that they are based on empirical science, challenged their 'protected' view of the world. They displayed a sense of entitlement not emanating from their faith, but rather from an approach to multiculturalism, broadly espoused and often promoted by government. This approach elevates personal identity over rational thinking. The students found evolution 'offensive' so did what our society tells them they are entitled to do. They refused to listen and by their refusal they were seeking to 'silence' their lecturers.

This censorship of ideas and views is not confined to students of faith. The mere anticipation of potential offence can lead the university to self-censor even before anything has been said or done. A prime example is the recent refusal by Warwick University's student union to host an atheist speaker, Maryam Namazie, who is well-known for her anti-Islam views. Namazie had been invited to speak by the Warwick Atheists, Secularists and Humanists Society when the Students' Union moved to block the event. They justified their action by stating that they had "a duty of care to conduct a

risk assessment for each speaker who wishes to come to campus.” They went on to say that because some articles written both by Namazie and about her indicate that “she is highly inflammatory, and could incite hatred on campus” they felt they had to ban her. They declared that their decision was taken “in deference to the right of Muslim students not to feel intimidated or discriminated against on their university campus ... rather than in the interests of suppressing free speech or freedom of expression”(Guardian 26/09/2015). It seems that all Maryam Namazie was guilty of was espousing secular views that challenged Islam and this was enough to have her banned. The irony is that members of the Students’ Union overlooked the fact that their own censorious action treated their Muslim members as too vulnerable to cope with contrary opinions. By banning Namazie, the Union in effect discriminated against Muslims, and indeed all students. Moreover, by claiming to protect freedom of expression they essentially ended it.

The way religious practice and identity are manifesting on campus illustrate the intellectual insecurity that is taking hold of the academy in favour of new political orthodoxies. In their eagerness to embrace the new politics that pander to cultural identity, however tenuous, universities find themselves allowing curbs on freedom of speech and sanctioning discriminatory practices that would be unacceptable in other contexts. Yet the justification is simple and much rehearsed, both on campus and outside in wider society: ‘You can’t say that, it offends my beliefs’.

The retrenchment of intellectual confidence and authority permeates the academy and manifests itself unsurprisingly in the behaviour of students and Student Unions up and down the country. Students walk out on lectures they consider contrary to their religious beliefs and student unions ‘no-platform’ speakers who represent views that are contrary to current orthodoxies, whether to do with faith, gender or culture.

It would be a mistake to blame religion for these illiberal practices. Rather, it is confusion about the academy’s fundamental role of fostering academic freedom and intellectual rigour that is at the heart of the problem. When the students walked out on that scientific lecture, some commentators saw it as evidence of too much freedom on campus. Newspapers such as the *Daily Mail* and websites such as *Jihad Watch* claimed it was yet another aspect of the Islamic extremism that had been allowed to take root on university campuses across the country. These commentators blamed universities themselves for encouraging it. They called for universities to further curtail academic freedom – of Islamic societies and Muslim students in particular. Even before the dubious Prevent policy made suspects out of students, academic freedom was under threat from those who fear ideas and would rather silence certain voices.

Preventing academic freedom

Perhaps the most pertinent of current religiously-inspired threats to academic freedom is the Prevent policy and its requirement that universities should police the behaviour, opinion, and even personal inclinations of its students. An impossible feat let alone an ethical one, and one that doesn’t just pose a risk to academic freedom but also to fundamental civil liberties of thought and association. The Prevent guidelines are covered in another chapter in more detail, but I would like to address the way religion and the academy have been put at loggerheads through such a misguided policy.

The most glaring inconsistency in Prevent and associated anti-radicalisation policies is that neither the terms ‘extremism’ nor ‘radicalisation’ have been defined satisfactorily. If we look at government guidance around the subject, we find the terms used so loosely that universities are at a loss about

how to interpret them. At Staffordshire University, a postgraduate student quietly reading a library book in the university's library was questioned and reported to security guards as a potential extremist. The fact that he is studying for an MA in Terrorism, Crime and Global Security and was reading one of the course textbooks didn't seem enough to exonerate him. The university subsequently apologised to the student and admitted fault, claiming it was responding to a "very broad duty ... to have due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism". The university also conceded that the duty was "underpinned by guidance ... [that] contains insufficient detail to provide clear practical direction in an environment such as the university's" (*The Guardian*, 24/09/2015). The blame is properly laid at the door of government regulation, although the question that begs itself is why universities did not oppose such policies in the first place?

The issue here is not simply one of insufficient guidance, but rather the erroneous link between radicalisation and universities. The fact is there is no evidence that UK universities or even universities' Islamic societies, however 'conservative' the views they may hold, are places where terrorism or terrorist acts have been initiated or planned. And the incident at Staffordshire University is not the only one of its kind. There have been similar instances where lecturers and researchers have been detained and in some cases lost their employment because of routine academic activity. The well-known case of Nottingham University's Hicham Yezza and Rizwan Sabir in 2008 provides a germane example. Rizwan, then a PhD student, had shared with Hicham an electronic document known as 'The Al-Qaida Training Manual'. The document, not actually created by Al-Qaeda, was open-source. i.e. readily available online. Both men were arrested and held for several days and although all charges were eventually dropped, the series of events had a profound effect on both the researchers and other academics. The policy encourages caution and self-censorship.

Rizwan Sabir has since become a lecturer specialising in counter-terrorism. In an email exchange I asked him what he thought was the impact of current anti-terror policies on academic freedom. He told me that "with the embedding of Prevent into the education and university sectors through the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015, it is fair to say things are getting worse for students and staff. In the past, the police were responsible for investigating and apprehending individuals suspected of being involved in terrorism. Now, however, this responsibility has been outsourced to university lectures and administrative staff who are not accountable in the same way." He outlined how this can lead to censorship of research material, "the fear of being subjected to coercive measures is leading individuals and organisations – such as the British Library which has refused to hold Taliban documents – to self-censor. It is undeniable that the consequences of deeply draconian measures are having highly damaging consequences for academics, researchers and students."

Another feature of this febrile atmosphere around religion in universities is the rush to make spurious connections between terrorists and their alma maters. For example, the accusation that individuals like Michael Adebolajo, one of the murderers of Fusilier Lee Rigby, or Mohammed Emwazi, the ISIS fighter known as 'Jihadi John,' were 'radicalised' by contact with dangerous dogma at university is tenuous at best. It puts immense pressure on universities. They are expected to spot and stop the development of extreme ideas in their students and gives them the near-impossible task of trying to ascertain the mental dispositions of their students and then intervene to 'correct' it. Worse, it has created an underlying air of suspicion between staff and students. At the beginning of this academic year one of my second-year Muslim students seemed to be sporting a slightly longer and bushier beard than last year. I found myself wondering whether it was a hipster beard or a sign of radicalisation! It also occurred to me that in this atmosphere of doubt, it would be problematic for

me to engage my students in debates around religion as they may fear being accused of extremism and I would fear accusations of radicalising my own students.

The case for faith in the academy

And so it is that religion and the academy find themselves locked in conflict, though not necessarily conflict of their own making. With the decline of religion as an intellectual endeavour, and of revolutionary ideologies in influencing politics, the modern state has eschewed the goal of social transformation in favour of technocratic management (Malik, 2015). What we have ended up with is a pseudo-religious discourse of good and evil coupled with a banal utilitarian and instrumentalist approach to constrict the freedom of the academy. Ostensibly a forum for discussion, delineation and discernment, the university now finds itself stripped of its basic function to exercise intellectual and ethical judgement. And religion is reduced to either a state of emotional vulnerability or a vehicle for violent extremism. It is vital that we not only expose the threats to academic freedom that are posed by this view of faith but that we advocate actively for faith in religion and faith in the academy, as well as freedom for both.

We will need to answer some questions such as ‘what good is the academy?’ and ‘what good is religion?’ To begin to answer these questions, we need to recognise that both should allow the space for meaning and sentiment to flourish, rather than reducing all questions to utilitarian purposes. At best, they are both open communities of enquiry that deal with ideas and ideals that can encapsulate the best of humanity.

The whole point about faith is to assert personal confidence in impossible things. Having faith in the academy is to have confidence in human intellect and reason and the centrality of freedom of ideas. It is also the space where we examine and challenge orthodoxies and propose alternatives. Back in 1969, Isaiah Berlin avowed his concern that academics and thinkers were failing to challenge dangerous ideas and warned of the consequences of this failure:

...there has, perhaps, been no time in modern history when so large a number of human beings, in both the East and the West, have had their notions, and indeed their lives, so deeply altered, and in some cases violently upset, by fanatically held social and political doctrines. Dangerous, because when ideas are neglected by those who ought to attend to them - that is to say, those who have been trained to think critically about ideas - they sometimes acquire an unchecked momentum and an irresistible power over multitudes of men that may grow too violent to be affected by rational criticism. (Berlin, 1969:1)

It is unnerving how applicable his words, shaped by the concerns of the Cold War, are to our current situation. Berlin is writing in defense of liberty and warning against the retreat in the academy from critical political engagement with difficult ideas. The problem he identifies then has magnified now with the reduction of academic liberty to a non-attainable freedom from offense, further hemmed in by the fear of religious radicals or any radical voice that challenges current orthodoxies of political correctness.

Enshrining academic freedom at the heart of university life will protect wider freedoms of expression and belief. Academic freedom arises from the foundational freedom of speech. Religious freedom is deeply connected to academic freedom. The latter guarantees the liberty to question, explore, and challenge received wisdom and established orthodoxies. This is exactly what all religions have done at many points in history. The liberty that people of faith claim for themselves, especially if they are from minority faiths, is that same liberty that treasures freedom of thought and

speech. To reduce faith to, at best, an emotional attachment to identity, and at worst an incitement to radical extremism means that it will by necessity occupy a negative space in the academy. And between cultural essentialism and political fear, academic freedom and the very purpose of the academy will remain under threat.

Religion and the academy are not strangers to each other though they have become increasingly estranged. Faith and critical reason are similar in leading to open horizons; they both promote a belief in strong spaces of creative possibility; belief in the room for fulfilment and self- and community- realisation. Both religion and the university form the basis for an informed community. Both communities could be open or closed. They can end in dogma or enquiry. But what they stand for is essentially liberty of faith and liberty of ideas from temporal power. (Russell 1993)

Some may still argue that religious dogma is diametrically opposed to the academic tradition of engaging in rational enquiry, and the freedom to do so without external restraints. They have a right to make that argument but equally they cannot and should not use it to silence or ban faith from the academy. Ethically and practically, it would be no different to the use of religion to stifle and silence debate. Both camps need to realise that such arguments ultimately undermine their own freedom of ideas and expression.

The current danger that religion represents to academic freedom is not its tenets or its articles of faith, but its alienation from the intellectual discourse in the academy. When regulations seek to restrict and silence those who profess a faith, academic freedom is restricted and academics and scholars are silenced. And when students decry their own silencing, but then adopt the mantle of victimhood and seek 'protection' from contrary views lest their faith sensibilities be hurt or challenged, they further undermine their own academic freedom.

What we are witnessing in twenty-first century Britain is a fervent zeal to enforce new socially-dictated and state-imposed orthodoxies. The new and increasingly popular doctrine of the diminished vulnerable individual coupled with a ubiquitous suspicion of liberty, are just as, if not more, harmful as religious dogma. Contemporary identity politics and security consciousness join together in seeking to vilify, ban and even criminalise certain forms of thought and speech. The new heretics are those who pose a challenge to this new dogmatism. And as free-thinking academics it behoves us to be those heretics.

It is time for the academy to rediscover its faith in its own mission and purpose, and the values of intellectual freedom and expression. It is also time for the academy to defend, promote and enforce all of the tenets of academic freedom. Encouraging a free, frank and sometimes bruising debate between advocates of faith and reason may be a good place to start.

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