

## The rise of a new orthodoxy

Secularism poses its own threat to free speech, argues Father Jordi Pujol.



Free speech is not only threatened by religious fundamentalism. There is another intolerance that comes from secularist doctrines, banning people from speaking in the name of a new orthodoxy. In the Cambridge English Dictionary, *secularism* is defined as “the belief that religion should not be involved with the ordinary social and political activities of a country”. As a *belief*, as a *doctrine*, secularism must not be imposed. The liberal tradition of free speech is based upon, among other things, the principles of tolerance of all speech, the neutrality of the public sphere, and of maintaining a free and open marketplace of ideas. There are several cases that show how secularism threatens these philosophical foundations of freedom of expression.

### *Some disturbing cases*

Ten years ago Pope Benedict XVI was invited to give the inauguration lecture at La Sapienza University in Rome, but a frenetic situation prevented the pope from speaking. The events evolved as such: a [manifesto](#) signed by a group of professors (“Keep the pope out of the University”) was sent to the university’s president, providing the basis of the controversy. They argued Ratzinger was an enemy of science, the Church had invaded the civil sphere and that religion was opposed to reason. A few weeks later, protests were organised on campus to boycott the event. These

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demonstrations were composed of a minority of students but received extensive media coverage in Italy. The events scheduled, some of them strongly irreverent, included assembly meetings and public readings of manifestos, and were planned to attract the attention of other students and the press.

Two days before the event, a group of students took over the main building on campus. That same morning, the Vatican confirmed the pope's visit to dissipate any concerns over the event but there were riots and a high risk of violence. In a [new statement](#) later that evening, the Vatican announced that the pope would not visit La Sapienza. That same night, the president of Italy wrote a letter to the pontiff regretting the intolerance shown by some groups by not allowing him to speak on campus. The [pontiff's speech](#) was sent to the president of *La Sapienza* and was read at the beginning of the academic event. Some Italian newspapers published it in full, helping to convey support for Ratzinger from secular and religious authorities that considered these events an affront to the principles of free speech.

One of the main pillars of the liberal tradition of free speech is the notion of tolerance of discourses, which in this case failed. The disagreement with Benedict's ideas evolved into unsafe riots that had nothing to do with rational debate. The dissent became censorship. A university is a place for human and intellectual growth through critical thinking and dialectical confrontation. It's a place to distinguish between respecting people and challenging their ideas. The disturbing thing here is the prevention of debate by imposing one's vision as infallible and unique, with violence toward things and people.

Another threat to freedom of expression comes from the emerging culture of *political correctness* among college students. In many campuses in the United States, particularly since 2015, new generations of students demand "safe spaces", where any offensive speech deemed as hurting the feelings of any group is prohibited. This has led students to ban speakers (cancelling lectures, debates, concerts, film screenings etc) in many universities, because they were considered "bigots", "noxious" or "dangerous".

It is the [paradox](#) of a country like the United States, champion of freedom of expression, in which younger generations ask for "protection" rather than "liberation". These student attitudes fit well with the "culture of prevention and safety" in which millennials have been educated. Rather than participating in strong and hostile debates, they prefer to operate in environments characterised by a politically correct dialectic that strongly clashes with liberal discourse and its concept of tolerance.

Thus, there are two similar paradoxes here. Benedict was presented as a threat against science and reason, when in his [undelivered speech](#) he defended the autonomy of the university in regards to political and ecclesiastical authority, stating, "it must be exclusively linked to the authority of the truth". The pope advocated the need for the university as an *institution* in modern society, precisely as a means to seek truth, because "the truth means more than knowledge: the knowledge of truth is aimed at knowledge of the good. The truth makes us good, and goodness is true". In short,

Benedict XVI presents the Christian message as a stimulus to the truth precisely because of its divine origin and, for that reason, it is a force against the threat of power and vested interests.

The conclusion was clear: beyond agreeing or not with the pontiff, his speech was neither threatening nor noxious for life under democracy. The only hostile attitude for democracy comes from intolerance that refuses to listen to the arguments of the other, and leads to banning people from speaking. This irrational slope easily leads to intimidation and fear, and even to physical violence.

The developments of the contemporary liberal tradition in free speech focused on academically justifying the freedom of expression of transgressors (Nazis, Ku Klux Klan and other harmful discourses), and the ability of the marketplace of ideas to promote truth and civility. However, it has not been able to distinguish between speech and insult, satire and sarcasm. A reaction to some abuses of speech has been the position of “no-platforming”, which posits that harmful speech should not be prohibited but institutions should not provide a platform, a space to spread their ideas, to those who espouse it. Professor Deborah Lipstadt's decision to decline an invitation to a debate that she knew David Irving, who is famous for denying the Holocaust, would also attend represents an alternative to “no-platforming”. The debate between creationists and evolutionists is similar. Some scientists, such as Richard Dawkins, would say, with spicy irony, something along the lines of: “Whenever a creationist invites me to hold a formal debate on the evidence of evolution, I respond: This would look very good on their resume, but not in mine.”

This slope is dangerous for public life. Not giving space to some kind of speech (No-Platforming) contains a prior decision of what is indisputably harmful, which is contradictory. If there is no space for expression, what is the point of speaking about expression? An argument without a platform for discussion is like a circular square. It is a silence imposed not only arbitrarily, but where arbitrariness assumes forms of honourable reputation, denying the possibility of discussing the merit of that presumed honour, which is nothing other than pure will. There is only one step from there to the irrational “legitimation” of violence. With this position we are contravening the liberal thesis of the *marketplace of ideas* and the refusal of censorship. But it is also a problem of logic, of denying the principle of no contradiction, of denying the bases of thought.

### *Why Are We Here? The Menace of Cultural Relativism*

After the disenchantment that followed the great European wars, with an ideological modernity of a rationalist and secularist cut, postmodernism imposed its rule. Postmodernity makes a clean slate of all the large narratives and advocates relativizing everything. There is a movement from the pride of modern reason to another type of dogmatism, this time with a nihilistic cut. [This new paradigm speaks of “liquid values”](#) in which softness prevails in forms, but which is based on indisputable principles. Its *neutral* mission must guarantee social rights to build one's individuality, according to absolute freedom of choice that is unquestionable. I consider that many challenges to free speech find their roots first in modernity and now in postmodern developments.

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One of the key questions of modernity was the emphasis on the individual and its subjectivity, rejecting any moral normativity and establishing autonomy as a paradigm. Today, in a postmodern context of cultural relativism, the references to reality and nature, to what is good or bad for man, have been cancelled. The prevailing relativism has led to a lowering of the tone on the foundation of society and man, imposing an agnostic view in the public sphere, guided by *ethical suspension* (called “neutrality”) as a keystone ??of the pluralist society. However, this neutrality is indeed *neutralism*, because religion and faith are excluded from the public sphere. Habermas, among others, denounced this [cognitive discrimination](#).

As the Media Studies scholar John D. Peters says [in an interview to be published next year](#), revelation and inquiry, debate and discussion go together and are part of life. It is not a matter of either faith or reason. Peters is “sympathetic with Habermas’ idea that there’s a kind of educational responsibility for people to be reasonable before they participate in the public sphere, because reasonability is also an ethical position, because to be reasonable is to respect otherness”.

I see two main problems with some contemporary free speech developments rooted in relativism. The principle of freedom of expression exercised exclusively in a self-referential way leads speech to become an end in itself. This freedom becomes narcissistic and easily evolves into a weapon, a mere instrument of conflict, because controversy becomes an end, cancelling rational dialogue and confrontation of ideas and opinions.

On the other hand, this self-referential freedom of speech backed by relativism forgets that liberal freedom also requires relativizing one’s own opinion or vision of things, opening up to dialogue with the ideas of others. Moral relativism justifies the exercise of self-referential and a-critical freedom, falling into illiberal and intolerant attitudes towards what is out of its worldview, with the censorship and silencing of uncomfortable voices potential results. As John D. Peters [states](#), “the danger in moral liberalism is the sin of pride. Liberalism should be a matter of: we don’t know.”

Relativism as a background philosophy narrows the understanding of free speech, because it doesn’t grasp that free speech is a *medium* that aims to display truth itself. I think that relativism helps to imprison free speech in its narcissistic circle of self-affirmation, preventing true dialogue, true listening of others’ arguments, and prohibiting the construction of a paradigm for responsible free speech that defends the rights of speakers and listeners beyond our own whims.

This is why I understand relativism as a real threat to freedom of expression because if it is impossible to discern what is good and true, there is no rational dialogue but mere self-affirmation and individualistic exhibition of one’s own ideas. With this picture, the only alternative is to speak *louder*, resort to offence and verbal or physical violence to dominate the public sphere. Arbitrary violence easily results in physical and psychological violence. When expression becomes a self-affirmation it takes the name of the “right to offend”. In this case, more than an expression of one’s own ideas, it becomes a weapon, a demonstration of violence (verbal or

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physical).

In a scenario like this, if freedom of expression is a *freedom to offend*, it becomes anti-liberal because it constitutes intimidation. This brings the moral question of the internal link between freedom of expression and reason to the table, between freedom of expression and the common social good. The acts of expression are called to be morally reasonable and open to recognition of the other, and not to be an empty self-affirmation of itself.

Part of the task of re-founding the principle of free speech points to a recovery of its roots based on the harmony between reason and faith, between the autonomy of the intellect and the nature of what things are. To rediscover that free speech was never meant to be unlimited. It constitutes a basilar freedom but not an end in itself. It is necessary to rediscover its foundations beyond ideologies, so that man can continue to search passionately for the truth and his full development as a man.

I totally agree with the diagnosis of two champions of freedom of speech, John D. Peters and Timothy Garton Ash, on the need to regenerate free speech theory. For [Peters](#), there is a need to purify the free speech tradition from “its supposed ethical superiority”, and [Garton Ash asserts](#) that we need not only *more* speech but *better* free speech, based on a common ground of human good.

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