

Editorial: On the Liberty of Thought and Discussion

It is odd that over 150 years after J.S. Mill's magisterial pronouncements on the topic, censorship should still worry us today. Or, to put it more accurately, it is worrying that people should still be attempting to censor thought and its expression in public in countries ostensibly committed to liberal values. There are, of course, the notorious instances of Salman Rushdie and the Danish cartoons; but, from quite different quarters, a debate on whether the prevalence of abortion affects the whole country adversely was quashed in a college of Oxford University, of all places. Some of those objecting claimed that only women should be allowed to discuss such a thing and that having it debated might make some people feel 'uncomfortable'. Meanwhile the English Secretary of State for Education is insisting that faith schools teach 'gay rights', while leaving it unclear whether a teacher in a state school could express reservations about the concept of gay marriage without facing the sack. This last thing hasn't been tried or tested – yet; but, in the prevailing mood, it is all too clear what the outcome of such a test is likely to be. It is, though, worth remarking that the 'fundamental British value', in supposed defence of which the Secretary of State made her pronouncement, was that we (in Britain, and in particular, teachers in Britain) should show 'tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs'; this tolerance may not extend to those who express views not deemed acceptable to the Secretary of State.

Philosophers as a group do not and should not have a common view on any of the substantive issues involved, or indeed on any others, except perhaps this. Liberty of thought and discussion means just that, and it is something which those committed to the life of the mind should be prepared to defend. It also means that things will be said which upset people, make them feel uncomfortable, maybe even lead them to question cherished presuppositions, and in ways that might be provocative, irreverent, robust and even (heaven forbid!) tasteless. One of the students involved in the Oxford protest proclaimed that 'the idea that in a free society absolutely everything should be open to debate has a detrimental effect on marginalised groups'. One could, of course, say to people who react in this way to some vigorous expression of an objectionable view that

Editorial

all this is part of the glorious dissatisfaction of a Socrates. Are they men, in Mill's sense, or would they rather wallow in the comfort of a stygian darkness? Or perhaps, more directly, tell them to grow up; everything being open to debate, even irreverent debate, is what living in a free society means. It is particularly shameful when censorship is exercised by the state and its institutions, and even more in a university college.

Expression of opinion in a free society is one thing, using the institutions of a free society to subvert that freedom is another. So, to unravel a knot often tied in this area, saying that the Danish cartoons should not be censored does not imply that videos of terrorist victims being beheaded should be shown. The intent of the beheading videos is not to provoke discussion, but to create terror. They are instruments of the same terrorism which carried out the beheadings, part indeed of it. Their purpose is to create terror, to intimidate the majority and to radicalise a minority who may glory in such things. Either way, the clear intention of the videos is to undermine the freedoms we enjoy and have fought for in the West, for intimidation by terror is likely to lead to countervailing repression and restriction of freedoms, while further radicalisation will lead to further terrorist activity. It is no part of a reasoned defence of freedom of expression to allow freedom of expression to those who would use it to undermine that very freedom. But, if we ourselves allow that freedom to be chipped away by political correctness or by a general wilting before the sensibilities of 'marginalised' groups or others claiming to be 'hurt' in the cut and thrust of debate, any defence we have against terrorism in the name of liberty will come to seem threadbare and merely opportunist.