

Down with the thought police!

By Andrew Robinson

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This piece was a reply to an ongoing discussion in the Naspir (Network of Activists Scholars of Politics and International Relations) discussion group, which began when a contributor wrote a pre-Easter rant attacking Christianity and its heritage as a combination of bigoted ideas and fraud. Among other things, he alleged that Jesus was a misogynist and encouraged men to “act like unfaithful randy fuck-machines”, and that Christianity was the cause of genocide against the Native Americans, the Jews and others, as well as the burning of heretics, religious wars, etc. Controversial, certainly – but instead of trying to rebut his accusations, critics denounced the writer for his offensive language, both in terms of his use of swear-words and his “vile and inaccurate attack” which one contributor denounced as hate-speech and as inappropriate to Naspir as a humanitarian list. This produced a retort from one of the two moderators that the original post was indeed inappropriate and that the writer had been warned off-list about language and relevance and threatened with being banned from the list. I felt this whole episode to be an overreaction, especially since the concerns regarding the accuracy and legitimacy of the claims made about Christianity were quickly buried beneath claims regarding the use of bad language, the supposedly apolitical nature of the article and the inappropriately intemperate tone. Hence this retort.

I'm fed up of the way in which public (and private) space is being closed by liberals and right-wingers whose overdeveloped sensitivity to trivialities acts as a cover for their reliance on reactive character-armouring to suppress strong emotions, and on their distance from the anger and frustration of the socially excluded. Such people end up silencing the very people they are trying to liberate. Let us recall, first of all, that offence is relative to the structure of one's desire. Given that desire is multiple and diverse, it therefore follows that what is offensive to one is inoffensive to another, and that anything can be offensive to someone. To confirm this proposition, it is necessary only to look at cases of psychological difference and the effects certain words can have in this

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context. The idea of “offensive language” as such is therefore a reification, displacing the offence which emerges as a result of the intersection of social relations with particular structures of desire. In this way, the subjective side of the experience of offence is elided and naturalised. Since different people are offended by different things, it must of course be a particular group who are able to elide and naturalise their own reactions, and therefore establish their own peculiar reactions as universal facts pertaining to language. Since others (e.g. the psychologically different) are not thereby protected from words and phrases which offend them, the resultant conceptual schema amounts to a partisan linguistic-political dictatorship by the socially included. The excluded are treated asymmetrically, in that, while not protected from what offends them, they are expected to actively avoid offending the sensitivities of others, whose sensitivities they neither feel nor understand.

Religious people often think their peculiar ideas deserve special protection, because they attach overarching importance to such ideas. This is a throwback to the days when religious ideas were imposed by the state or by religious organisations such as the Inquisition. Yet others may have ideas which can equally well be offended. Would a polemic against Stalin, condemning him as a mass murderer and a bigot, have the same effect as one against Jesus? Surely not – yet it may be just as offensive to card-carrying communists. Offensive or not, how can one exclude frank debate about the Stalin regime from the subject of politics and IR? Yet how is Jesus different? In that he was living so long ago? In that case, can't we criticise Plato either? Or is it simply that Christians are lucky enough to be part of the social mainstream, whereas communists are considered fringe “extremists”? But isn't this just the kind of exclusionary, reactionary nonsense a critical scholarship should aim to overthrow?

I'm not saying this because I have any particular dislike for Jesus – I have some attraction to some of the things he stands for (especially the bit where he kicked the moneylenders out the temple) – but if there are problems regarding his attitude to women and regarding other issues with his concrete politics, these should be brought out into the open and discussed fully and frankly. Jesus is, after all, ostensibly a real inspiration for the likes of Ian Paisley, the IRA, General Franco, the Lord's Resistance Army, Pat Buchanan etc., etc.

So-called coarse language is an invention of the bourgeoisie and petty-bourgeoisie to drive an ideological wedge between itself and the socially excluded (working class and urban and rural poor, youths, minorities etc.), by imposing modes of speech specific to those comfortable in their social position as “proper” for everyone, and thereby impeding the freedom of speech of those whose social conditions make them angry and frustrated. The excluded are enraged, and do not curvy words – they have a frustration they wish to voice and release through language. So what if this makes less comfortable reading for the well-off? Any look at Malcolm X's work reveals a terrible ire which in its expression will not stop short of offending

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anyone. One can criticise Malcolm for his views, but for his style? How is he to express his anger without angry speech? Is he to pretend to be happy and well-off when he isn't? Is he to repress his anger, born of real social conditions, in order not to cause offence to those whose social position is more privileged than his? Is he to be kept out of NASPIR and goodness knows where else, because his words offend the delicate ears of the "civilised"?

There's an anecdote recounted in Grunberger's *Social History of the Third Reich*, of a woman who phoned a German radio station to protest at a broadcast about the treatment of the Jews. Not because the story covered genocide, not because it condoned and incited genocide, but – because the words used included "coarse" language, and were unsuitable for young ears. Here is the truth of anti-swearing prejudice – concern about real social problems, real violence, displaced into concern about language, concern that the norms which insulate language from the violence of the world have been broken (initiating no doubt a return of the repressed; it is no coincidence that so many swear-words are connected to sex, excrement, etc.). Part of the whole delusion that "anti-social behaviour", behaviour which represents a return of the real of social antagonism, which amounts to a rebellion by the oppressed, is somehow an enemy of "everyone" (an "everyone" which, of course, excluded the "nobodies", the excluded, the oppressed).

At the same time, really harmful words, which arise as part of apparatuses of oppression, are widely tolerated and never tabooed. "Arrest", "confiscate", "evict", "corrall", "execute" – truly dangerous words, part of a statist Newspeak which treats the same acts as somehow different if they are carried out by state agents. The real meaning of these words: abduct, steal, make homeless, pig-pen (I borrowed that from SchNews), murder. The first set are harmful – but who would dare taboo them?

People with an intense awareness of real issues – people for whom "collective punishment" and its ilk are at the forefront of our awareness, even more so people who are the actual or imminent victims of the system's violence – have more important concerns than to get offended by words – they are too busy being offended by the gun shoved in their face, by the truncheon on their head, by the tank knocking down their house. Let's direct our anger at those whose discourse produces such violence – the ultra-serious politicians, bosses and generals who never so much as utter an "oh, damn" – rather than at the strong words of the oppressed and the excluded.

Long live heresy! Long live "coarse" language! Long live free speech!

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