

So.. let's delve into a little history.

Our religious heritage traces back to the English Dissenters – Protestant Christians who separated from the Church of England in 16th, 17th and 18th centuries. At that time, church and state were largely inseparable entities, and they dictated what people could officially believe and how they worshipped. Religion reinforced the authority of the monarchy, and the state enforced the standards of the church. Dissenters were those who disagreed with this state of affairs in one way or another.

But the Reformation and the Enlightenment had unleashed the winds of freedom, and dissenting religious and political factions abounded in England at the time. It's an intriguing exercise to read the names of some of them: Anabaptists, Barrowists, Behmenists, Brownists, Diggers, Enthusiasts, Grindletonians, Levellers, Muggletonians, Puritans, Quakers, Ranters, Rationalists, Sabbatarians, Seekers, Socinians.

Whatever their flavor, the dissenters typically paid a heavy price by standing up for their beliefs – they were, after all, speaking out against the church or the state, or both. It was illegal to gather to worship in the way they wanted to. And punishments were severe in those times. One could lose a nose, or an ear, irrevocably marked as a traitor for life. Prisons were brutal exercises in survival. And transport to the New World became a way to rid the Isles of these dangerous men and women.

Many of them, of course, also came voluntarily to the new American colonies, seeking a place where they could practice their religious beliefs and implement their political ideas, and the great majority of American religions have been from one dissenting tradition or another – even those we consider mainstream, like Baptists and Methodists.

Is it any wonder that the First Amendment has become the most revered of our political organizing principles?

*Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.*

Powerful stuff. That one paragraph is the distillation of 3 centuries of political and religious struggle, and at its core is the essential truth that the free exercise of religion is not possible without freedom of speech. Which is the same thing as freedom of thought, for a thought unspoken has no power.

Because of this, free speech has always been a right that must be continuously fought for.

What I find distressing is not that freedom of speech is under attack from the powers that be – that has always been true.

No, what I find distressing is that freedom of speech is now under attack from the left side of the spectrum, because freedom of speech means that one will inevitably offend someone, or some group of people or interests.

While not wanting to give offense is a laudable intention, and we do not wish to give offense unnecessarily, in a free society there must be a fundamental right to free speech. There is no right not to be offended.

British writer and social commentator Kenan Malik says this about free speech:

*People have the right to say what they wish, short of inciting violence, however offensive others may find it. Others have the right not to listen or to watch. Nobody has the right to be listened to. And nobody has the right not to be offended.*

*Many people argue that while free speech may be a good, it must necessarily be less free in a plural society. For diverse societies to function and to be fair, so the argument runs, we need to show respect not just for individuals but also for the cultures and beliefs in which those individuals are embedded and which helps give them a sense of identity and being.*

*This requires that we police public discourse about those cultures and beliefs, both to minimise friction between antagonistic groups and to protect the dignity of those individuals embedded in them. As the sociologist Tariq Modood has put it, that 'If people are to occupy the same political space without*

*conflict, they mutually have to limit the extent to which they subject each others' fundamental beliefs to criticism.'*

*In fact, it is precisely because we do live in a plural society that we need the fullest extension possible of free speech. In such a society, it is both inevitable and important that people offend the sensibilities of others. Inevitable, because where different beliefs are deeply held, clashes are unavoidable. Almost by definition such clashes express what it is to live in a diverse society. And so they should be openly resolved than suppressed in the name of 'respect' or 'tolerance'.*

*But more than this: the giving of offence is not just inevitable, it is also important. Any kind of social change or social progress means offending some deeply held sensibilities. Or to put it another way: 'You can't say that!' is all too often the response of those in power to having their power challenged. To accept that certain things cannot be said is to accept that certain forms of power cannot be challenged.*

*The notion of giving offence suggests that certain beliefs are so important or valuable to certain people that they should be put beyond the possibility of being insulted, or caricatured or even questioned. The importance of the principle of free speech is precisely that it provides a permanent challenge to the idea that some questions are beyond contention, and hence acts as a permanent challenge to authority.*

*This is why free speech is essential not simply to the practice of democracy, but to the aspirations of those groups who may have been failed by the formal democratic processes; to those whose voices may have been silenced by racism, for instance. The real value of free speech, in other words, is not to those who possess power, but to those who want to challenge them. And the real value of censorship is to those who do not wish their authority to be challenged. Once we give up on the right to offend in the name of 'tolerance' or 'respect', we constrain our ability to challenge those in power, and therefore to challenge injustice.*

He goes on to say:

*There can be no freedom of religion without the freedom to offend.*

*Freedom of worship is another form of freedom of expression – the freedom to believe as one likes about the divine and to assemble and enact rituals with respect to those beliefs. You cannot protect freedom of worship without protecting freedom of expression. Take, for instance, the Dutch populist politician Geert Wilders’ attempt to outlaw the Qur’an in Holland because it ‘promotes hatred’. Or the attempt by Transport for London to ban a Christian anti-gay poster because it is ‘offensive to gays’. Believers have as much right to offend liberal sensibilities as liberals have the right to offend religious ones. Freedom of speech requires that everyone has the right to cause offense. So does freedom of religion.*

That’s a lesson our religious forebears learned the hard way, with blood and sacrifice. Without their offenses to church and state, we would not be here. It is a lesson that we appear to be forgetting.

Let me be clear that I’m not advocating being gratuitously offensive, or advocating the use of hate speech. What I am saying is that suppressing speech and suppressing ideas are functionally identical, and that we must never fear giving offense or taking offense in the interest of engagement with those ideas – no matter how distasteful they might be.

As Hubert Humphrey said, Freedom is hammered out on the anvil of discussion, dissent, and debate.

Last spring, the DRE at my home congregation retired after 35 years of service to Unitarian Universalism. In her farewell address, she observed that the thing she held most dear about our faith was that “There was no question that was forbidden to ask.”

This is perhaps the most essential function of free speech. The right to ask questions. To question authority. To expose every idea to the process of reason. Not to submit unquestioningly to any dogma or ideology.

And that includes questioning our own beliefs and co-religionists.

I fear that our leadership and our denomination is becoming more and more ideological, more driven by a particular politics than by an expansive universalist understanding of the world. We have only to look at our own congregations to see the results of this trend. There are fewer people with different

politics in our pews, and fewer questions are considered acceptable, as we inhabit an increasingly narrower set of ideas and worldviews.

Our rationalist and humanist forebears were inspired by the Radical Enlightenment – who envisioned a world based on principles of universal reason and equality.

Enlightenment rationalism did away with the medieval conception of a stratified and enchanted cosmos, wherein the existing social order was an expression of divine law. A properly universal conception of nature, subject to intelligible and determining natural law, displaced the mystery of the divine order that defined the medieval period. An divine order that was only interpretable by priests and kings.

The Enlightenment provided a new view of humanity as well. The qualitative plurality of peoples gave way to a belief in one common human nature, understandable by all, and commonly governed by our natural faculty of reason. Enlightenment principles thus opposed the subjugation of minority communities based on some supposedly innate difference from the majority.

What we are seeing around us is the increasing division of people into groups based on a few characteristics of gender, race, class, culture, and politics. Our complexity is being denied. Red is red, and blue is blue, and never the twain shall meet.

What is alarming is that these divisions are seen to be the result of properties inherent in the people involved – and that there is no universal human nature, but rather unbridgeable differences between distinct groups.

Such differences cannot be questioned, nor are such differences amenable to mutual understanding. Everything is now subjective interpretation, and any sense of a universal humanity or objective reality has been abandoned. We are returning to medieval times.

The medieval world was one in which cultures were not only stratified and separated from each other, but in which the cultures themselves were rigidly defined and in which individual identity was bounded by ones cultural identity. Freedom as we know it was unimaginable and unknowable. Ones identity was

tribal, not personal and individual. You were a Jew, or a Gaul, or a Moor, or a Christian, or a Greek, and you had little identity beyond that.

Who among us wants to return to such a world?

The roots of our free religion lie with the freethinkers of the dissenting traditions and the natural philosophers of the Enlightenment. Freedom of conscience, and freedom of religion, and individual freedom were hard won from the bitter soil of a rigid, hierarchical, tribal world.

That liberation brought us to this time and place, and shaped the religion we call Unitarian and Universal. And now we seemed poised to throw away that heritage.

I think that the right of free speech, the right to think freely, and to worship freely – or not at all – has never been in more peril than it is now. And it is in danger from the left, as liberalism continues to fall out of favor.

When free speech is circumscribed, and the free exchange of ideas and the free intermingling of people and cultures is discouraged, and the ideas of a universal humanity and universal equality are dismissed, we are not stepping into a bright future, but the dark past.

I think that Unitarian Universalism needs to revive and renew its liberal Enlightenment heritage, its universalist ideals, and a rigorous internal commitment to reason and dissent.

In the words of the old Texas saying about loyalty - You dance with them that brung ya.

We have a heritage, and it is deep and wide and wise.

Let's dance.