**Teaching ‘Freedom of Speech’ Freely**

This chapter takes a position on the supposed ‘free speech crisis’ on university campuses from the perspective of someone who actually teaches students. In particular, I suggest that the concept of ‘freedom of speech’, as well as being wilfully misrepresented by some of its staunchest self-appointed defenders, is itself worth interrogating. Doing this, I suggest, is to subject revered ‘liberal values’ to question and, in turn, to ultimately encourage multiplicity of voices in the classroom.

In January 2015, I began teaching a new final year module that I had designed for the English course at the University of Derby. On censorship, offence and ‘freedom of speech’ in literature from the 17th Century to the present day, the issues raised by this module seemed particularly timely. A few weeks earlier on 7 January, two heavily armed men, Saïd and Chérif Kouachi, entered the Paris offices of the satirical French newspaper *Charlie Hebdo*. After the Kouachi brothers opened fire, killing 12 people, a pursuit and standoff with the two men resulted in their own deaths later that evening. While there were subsequent attacks by other individuals in Île-de-France between 7 and 9 January, it is the first and deadliest of these that has received most media attention and comment.

The Kouachis’ motives were soon the subject of speculation. *Charlie Hebdo* had, after all, been struck before. In 2011, its former offices were destroyed in a firebombing attack following the publication of its provocative 3 November edition. Renamed *Charia Hebdo* (‘Sharia Hebdo’ in English), it had included caricatures of Muhammad while purporting to be guest edited by the prophet. *Charlie Hebdo*’s long-standing irreverence towards political, religious and other cultural figures therefore offered a ready-made explanation for the attack. Indeed, on the day of the 2015 shooting, Prime Minister David Cameron stated in the House of Commons that, ‘while details remain[ed] unclear’, the attack was nevertheless declared to be in opposition to French and British values of ‘free speech and democracy’; values that ‘these people’ could never hope to destroy.[[1]](#endnote-1) The following evening, the BBC’s *This Week* opened with a monologue from its presenter and host Andrew Neil who accused ‘Fundamental [*sic*] Islam’ of lacking a sense of humour: ‘it doesn’t like to be mocked, ridiculed, belittled or made to look silly. It can’t even take a joke and it can’t take criticism’.[[2]](#endnote-2)

The idea that the *Charlie Hebdo* attack was an attack on satire or the very concept of ‘free speech’ gained traction within a post-9/11 climate that asserted Islam’s supposed ‘intolerance’ and incompatibility with ‘Western values’. This can be traced at least as far back as the so-called ‘Rushdie Affair’ of the 1980s and 1990s. The publication of Salman Rushdie’s novel *The Satanic Verses* (1988)infamously angered many Muslims and led to organised book burnings, attacks on bookshops, the murder of Rushdie’s Japanese translator and the Ayatollah of Iran issuing a *fatwa* against the author’s life forcing him into hiding. *Charlie Hebdo*’s own provocations of Islam, on the other hand, aligned with the more recent *Jyllands-Posten* controversy of 2005. The Danish newspaper had similarly published images of the prophet Muhammad in the name of ‘free speech’, leading to protests across the Muslim world and even sparking a diplomatic crisis. *Charlie Hebdo* themselves republished these cartoons in 2009. The notion that Muslims were less inclined or even hostile towards ‘free speech’ was therefore well established by 2015.

While it perhaps would have been crass of me to have explicitly asked students to reflect upon so recent a tragedy, the implications of *Charlie Hebdo* nevertheless informed my thinking, and that of my students, throughout the new module. I do not wish to imply that the positions I assert in this essay are informed by one iteration of the module in 2015. Instead, my thinking has changed through both my own retrospective thoughts and, more importantly, the experience of engaging with *multiple* cohorts of intelligent, diverse and well-informed people in the classroom.

To be a student on a degree within Arts and Humanities is to anticipate interrogating pre-conceived ideas. From the perspective of a lecturer, the ideal situation is that your students will end a module thinking rather differently from when they had entered it. While a certain segment of observers might see this as evidence of ‘indoctrination’, it should instead be seen as an act of liberation; to risk over-inflating what it is that we do, we encourage students *how* rather than *what* to think. As a young academic who had only been in the role for a year in January 2015, I was excited that my new module should do just this. The syllabus was full of provocative and challenging texts, many of which had been historically banned or subject to censorship, that would hopefully encourage students to rethink their attitudes towards, for instance, morality and the representation of sex and violence in literary art. An awareness of history – for instance why, what, when and how were texts censored or deemed offensive in different historical periods – would similarly allow students to comprehend that ‘values’, including their own, are largely determined by context.

I had not guessed, however, that interrogation of the very notion of ‘freedom of speech’ itself would prove to be the module’s major theme. This was to always form part of the syllabus – incidentally when studying *The Satanic Verses* and the play *Behzti* (2004) by the Sikh playwright Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti – but over the years it has come to inform the module as a whole. This has primarily been due to the influence of students, as I discuss below, but the media response to incidents such as the *Charlie Hebdo* attack as well as more contemporary calls for ‘freedom of speech’ on university campuses have made such an interrogation all the more urgent. The new Office for Students names ‘freedom of speech’ on campus as one of their ‘public interest governance principles’ for instance while the notorious *Spiked! Online* published a series of ‘Free Speech University Rankings’ between 2015 and 2018.[[3]](#endnote-3)

Examining the immediate aftermath of *Charlie Hebdo* exposes a contradiction at the heart of ‘freedom of speech’. In asserting the importance of being able to belittle, critique or ridicule even the most sacred of things is to argue for the primacy of irreverence. It is paradoxical then that this very ‘irreverence’ becomes itself revered. It is more complex than arguing that the ‘sanctity’ of a satirical magazine’s right to poke fun is weighted equally against the ‘sanctity’ of an icon revered by a minority group; David Cameron’s comments following the *Charlie Hebdo* attack, after all, assert the predominance of the former. For me to make these remarks is to risk being misunderstood as an apologist for an appalling terrorist attack or, perhaps worse, to intellectualise it. Indeed, I myself unfairly accused friends and colleagues of doing just this in January 2015. Criticism of *Charlie Hebdo* and those who write disparagingly about Islam, for instance, I felt was being used to justify the murders of 12 people. I was wrong, but the affair does reveal a problem with the conflation of ‘freedom of speech’ with the victims of terrorism. Not only does the horror of the event itself resist objective reflection – one does not ‘speak ill of the dead’ after all – there is also the risk that such a narrative turns the victims, ironically, into martyrs. In this way, the irreverent satirists become revered as champions of free speech. Anshuman Mondal’s description of free expression ‘as a totem of Western culture’ then is an apt turn of phrase since it emphasises the quasi-religious reverence placed on something that ostensibly stands for the opposite.[[4]](#endnote-4) There is an irony, too, in individuals labelling themselves as ‘free speech fundamentalists’ on social media platforms. While it is possible that these people are playfully aware of such an obvious contradiction, it nevertheless reveals the paradox at the heart of the supposed ‘free speech debate’; a dogmatic adherence to something that should be anti-dogma by nature.[[5]](#endnote-5)

What then might be the implications for the study of ‘freedom of speech’ in the classroom? Certainly, the very notion of freedom of speech itself should be subject to question. Also, that the concept has been weaponised in a manner aimed to assert the superiority of ‘Western’ culture has important ideological implications for teaching. This should be considered a topic for discussion of course – such as on a session covering the consequences of the ‘Rushdie Affair’ for instance – but it should also inform teaching *practice*. This is not a question of sensitivities; students in my experience are far from censorious and are not the sensitive ‘snowflakes’ they are so commonly painted as in the media. My students read texts by the Marquis de Sade and engage with his troubling libertine philosophy; they read *Saved* (1965) by the controversial playwright Edward Bond and do not feel compelled to censor it unlike, allegedly, a *Daily Mail* reviewer of its 2011 production.[[6]](#endnote-6) Similarly, in a diverse class that every year includes at least one Muslim student, we openly discuss Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses.*

It is this very diversity and the willingness of students to engage thoughtfully with provocative material that has led to a plurality of perspectives and the ‘freest’ discussion. A self-proclaimed ‘free speech fundamentalist’ may well agree with me when I suggest that students should be challenged and be expected to reckon with ideas they might personally find distasteful. There is of course no expectation that students should somehow endorse the values of the writers they study: if there has been an unusual upsurge of Sadeian perversion in the East Midlands over the last 5 years, I certainly have not heard about it. Yet I confess that in designing the module in 2014 I had anticipated, or at least hoped, that students would leave the module having internalised the values of ‘free speech’, whatever I then meant by that. Upon reflection though, this raises the question as to why students, taught both to be critical and disinterested towards course material, should nevertheless be expected to ultimately adopt a certain set of values. If anything, perhaps the most important experiences that students have on the module are those that shake their pre-existing certainty in ‘free speech’; this is not the sort of ‘challenging ideas’ that a ‘free speech fundamentalist’ would necessarily have endorsed.

Having students from a wide variety of backgrounds – ethnic, social, economic or religious – has been key to the module’s success. Because our students at Derby are not entirely made up of middle-class people from the Home Counties, dissenting perspectives on some of the major controversies that we engage with on the module are not simply those of an absent ‘other’. This is useful in highlighting that ‘freedom of speech’ is neither neutral nor universal. For a Muslim student to freely discuss *The Satanic Verses*, for instance, is of course important in defying frankly racist stereotypes of supposed Muslim bigotry. At the same time, by encouraging the articulation of any offence taken at a work in a supportive classroom environment helps to understand the nature and extent of it. It is surely illiberal to force individual students to ‘suck it up’ or to marginalise their perspectives. ‘Freedom of speech’ – if it is anything – should not be monolithic or ‘all or nothing’; it is quite possible for an individual to reject literature or art that they find distasteful without them being opposed to a broader abstract concept of free expression.

To teach ‘freedom of speech’ freely and without restraint then is to discourage monopoly of conversation. This requires a respectful and diverse classroom environment that, in encouraging a multiplicity of perspectives, must by its very nature resist the dogmatic. The under-examined notion of ‘freedom of speech’ can in itself ironically become prescriptive; that the Office for Students are to soon enforce that it be ‘upheld’ on university campuses makes this clear. If we *truly* stand for free and open discussion in class, we must be willing to entertain critique of the supposed ‘liberal values’ deemed to make the conversation possible in the first place. In short, to promote ‘freedom of speech’ in UK Higher Education should not mean having to ultimately uncritically endorse the supposed ‘values’ of British ‘liberal’ democracy.

1. CBC News, ‘British Prime Minister reacts to *Charlie Hebdo Shooting’*, 7 January 2015. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lGzG_uHlebs&feature=youtu.be>>, 0:16–0:33 [Accessed 16/02/2020]. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. BBC *This Week,* ‘Andrew Neil - Islam "squalid death cult"’ [uploaded by

Elliptical878], 9 January 2015. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HFiDR7swINE&feature=youtu.be>>, 0:20–0:33 [Accessed 16/02/2020]. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Office for Students, ‘Freedom of Speech’ <<https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/student-wellbeing-and-protection/freedom-of-speech/>> [Accessed 16/02/2020];

Tom Slater, ‘Free Speech University Rankings’, 24 February 2019 <<https://www.spiked-online.com/free-speech-university-rankings/>> [Accessed 16/02/2020]. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Anshuman A. Mondal, ‘Revisiting *The Satanic Verses*: The Fatwa and Its Legacies’ in Robert Eaglestone (ed.) and Martin McQuillan (ed.), *Salman Rushdie: Contemporary Critical Perspectives* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 59-71; p. 61. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. The word ‘fundamentalist’ carries with it a set of associations that, in the contemporary world, suggest ‘free speech fundamentalist’ to be a label that is possibly more than simply ‘playful’; rather, it is potentially provocative. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. See Dan Rebellato, ‘The Limits of Criticism’, <<http://www.danrebellato.co.uk/spilledink/2013/3/12/the-limits-of-criticism>> [Accessed 16/02/2020]. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)