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The Culture of Offendedness?

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A new and unprecedented right is now the central focus of legal, procedural, and cultural concern in many corridors—a supposed right not to be offended. The cultural momentum behind this purported “right” is growing fast, and the logic of this movement has taken hold in many universities, legal circles, and interest groups.

The larger world received a rude introduction to the logic of offendedness when riots broke out in many European cities, prompted by a Dutch newspaper’s publishing of cartoons that reportedly mocked the Prophet Muhammad. The logic of the riots was that Muslims deserved never to be offended by any insult, real or perceived, directed to their belief system. Unthinking Christians may fall into the same pattern of claiming offendedness whenever we face opposition to our faith or criticism of our beliefs. The risk of being offended is simply part of what it means to live in a diverse culture that honors and celebrates free speech. A right to free speech means a right to offend, otherwise the right would need no protection.



These days, it is the secularists who seem to be most intent on pushing a proposed right never to be offended by confrontation with the Christian Gospel, Christian witness, or Christian speech and symbolism. This motivation lies behind the incessant effort to remove all symbols, representations, references, and images related to Christianity from the public square. The very existence of a large cross, placed on government property as a memorial, outside San Diego, California, has become a major issue in the courts, and now in Congress. Those pressing for the removal of the cross claim that they are offended by the fact that they are forced to see this Christian symbol from time to time.

We should note carefully that this notion of offendedness is highly emotive in character. In other words, those who now claim to be offended are generally speaking of an emotional state that has resulted from some real or perceived insult to their belief system or from contact with someone else’s belief system. In this sense, being offended does not necessarily involve any real harm but points instead to the fact that the mere presence of such an argument, image, or symbol evokes an emotional response of offendedness.

The distinguished Christian philosopher Paul Helm addresses this issue in an article published in the Summer 2006 edition of *The Salisbury Review*, published in Great Britain. As Professor Helm argues, “Historically, being offended has been a very serious matter. To be offended is to be caused to stumble so as to fall, to fail, to apostasize, to be brought down, to be crushed.” As evidence for this claim, Professor Helm points to the language of the King James Bible in which Jesus says to his disciples: “And if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast in to hell” [Matthew 5:29].

Likewise, Jesus also speaks a warning against those who would “offend” the “little ones.” As Professor Helm summarizes, “So to ‘offend’ in this robust sense is to be an agent of destruction. And to be offended is to be placed in desperate straits.”

The desperate straits are no longer required in order for an individual or group to claim the emotional status of offendedness. This shift in the meaning of the word and in its cultural usage is subtle but extremely significant.

Offering a rather robust definition of this new usage, Professor Helm describes this new notion of offendedness as “that one is offended when the words and actions of another produce a feeling of hurt, or shame, or humiliation on account of what is said of oneself about one’s deepest attachments.”

Professor Helm’s definition is rather generous, offering more substantial content to this modern notion than may be present in the claims of many persons. Many persons who claim to be offended are speaking merely of the vaguest notion of emotional distaste at what another has said, done, proposed, or presented. This leads to inevitable conflict.

“People have always been upset by insensitivity and negligence, but the profile of offendedness, understood in this modern sense, is being immeasurably heightened,” suggests Professor Helm. “The right never to be offended, never to suffer feelings of hurt or shame, is being touted and promoted both by the media and by the government and interest in it is being continually excited.” Thus, “Claims to be hurt or shamed are noticed. They are likely to be rewarded.”

The very idea of civil society assumes the very real possibility that individuals may at any time be offended by another member of the community. Civilization thrives when individuals and groups seek to minimize unnecessary offendedness, while recognizing that some degree of real or perceived offendedness is the cost the society must pay for the right to enjoy the free exchange of ideas and the freedom to speak one’s mind.

Professor Helm is surely right when he argues that the “social value” of offendedness is now increasing. All that is necessary for a claim to be taken seriously is for the claim to be offered. After all, if the essence of the offendedness is an emotional state or response, how can any individual deny that a claimant has been genuinely offended? Professor Helm is right to worry that this will lead to the fracturing of society. “We all hear things we don’t like said about people and causes that we are fond of but in the changed social atmosphere we are being encouraged to give public notice if such language offends us. I am now being repeatedly told that I am entitled not to be offended. So—from now on—not offended is what I intend to be. Does this heightening of sensitivity make for social cohesion? Does not such cohesion depend rather on enduring what we don’t like, and doing so in an adult way? Does not the glue of civic peace rest on such intangibles as the ability to laugh at oneself, to take a joke about even the deepest things? And is it not a measure of the strength of a person’s religion that they tolerate the unpleasant conversation of others? Isn’t playing the offendedness card going to result in an enfeebling of the culture, the development of oversensitive and precious members of the ‘caring society’? Whatever happened to toleration?”

Given our mandate to share the Gospel and to speak openly and publicly about Jesus Christ and the Christian faith, Christians must understand a particular responsibility to protect free speech and to resist this culture of offendedness that threatens to shut down all public discourse.

Of course, the right for Christians to speak publicly about Jesus Christ necessarily means that adherents of other belief systems will be equally free to present their truth claims in an equally public manner. This is simply the cost of religious liberty.

An interesting witness to this point is Salman Rushdie, the novelist who was once put under a Muslim sentence of death because he had insulted Muslim sensibilities in his novel *The Satanic Verses*. Mr. Rushdie presents an argument that Christians must take seriously.

“The idea that any kind of free society can be constructed in which people will never be offended or insulted is absurd. So too is the notion that people should have the right to call on the law to defend them against being offended or insulted. A fundamental decision needs to be made: do we want to live in a free society or not? Democracy is not a tea party where people sit around making polite conversation. In democracies people get extremely upset with each other. They argue vehemently against each other’s positions,” Rushdie insists.

As the novelist continues: “People have the fundamental right to take an argument to the point where somebody is offended by what they say. It is no trick to support the free speech of somebody you agree with or to whose opinion you are indifferent. The defense of free speech begins at the point where people say something you can’t stand. If you can’t defend their right to say it, then you don’t believe in free speech. You only believe in free speech as long as it doesn’t get up your nose.”

As the Apostle Paul made clear in writing to the Corinthians, the preaching of the Gospel has always been considered

offensive by those who reject it. When Paul spoke of the cross as “foolishness” and a “stumbling block” [1 Corinthians 1:23] he was pointing to this very reality—a reality that would lead to his own stoning, flogging, imprisonment, and execution.

At the same time, Paul did not want to offend persons on the basis of anything *other* than the cross of Christ and the essence of the Christian Gospel. For this reason, he would write to the Corinthians about becoming “all things to all people, that by all means I might save some” [1 Corinthians 9:22].

Without doubt, many Christians manage to be offensive for reasons other than the offense of the Gospel. This is to our shame and to the injury of our Gospel witness. Nevertheless, there is no way for a faithful Christian to avoid offending those who are offended by Jesus Christ and His cross. The truth claims of Christianity, by their very particularity and exclusivity, are inherently offensive to those who would demand some other gospel.

Christians must not only contend for the preservation and protection of free speech—essential for the cause of the Gospel—we must also make certain that we do not fall into the trap of claiming offendedness for ourselves. We must not claim a right not to be offended, even as we must insist that there is no such right and that the social construction of such a right will mean the death of individual liberty, free speech, and the free exchange of ideas.

Once we begin playing the game of offendedness, there is no end to the matter. There simply is no right *not* to be offended, and we should be offended by the very notion that such a right could exist.

This article was first published August 4, 2006. During the month of July, I will be posting new articles and also featuring some articles from the archives I hope you will find helpful. This month requires a different schedule as I spend time with family and do groundwork on upcoming articles, messages, books, and projects. My normal schedule for new articles will resume as August begins.

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