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WHEN FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND EMOTIONS COLLIDE ON CAMPUS

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Cultural Discernment (Viewpoint)

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SYNOPSIS

A battle over free speech dominates the newsfeeds of online media. The rhetoric grows harsher as two sides seek to establish competing narratives. Are our universities dominated by a privileged class that forces vulnerable minorities to study in a hostile environment, or is the problem really that emotionally fragile students cannot handle dissenting opinions without experiencing emotional meltdowns? It can be difficult to establish a clear definition of safe spaces or to determine limits to the right of students to govern their participation in curriculum they find troubling. Any effort to communicate is frustrated by different sides using similar moral terminology with different meanings, one objectively grounded and the other emotionally grounded. We must recommit to understanding universities as institutions aimed at fostering open dialogue in pursuit of knowledge and truth. The Bible offers examples of countering bad speech with good speech through the examples of both Jesus and Paul. We cannot become so afraid of offending others that we cease to equip the next generation of intellectual leaders to confront the most difficult issues of our age.

In August of 2016, the University of Chicago's Dean of Students John Ellison sent a letter to the incoming class of 2020, informing them that the university doesn't support trigger warnings (a warning that what is about to be said or expressed may be emotionally upsetting for certain individuals), won't cancel speakers for representing controversial positions, and won't condone the creation of safe spaces. The university expects students to be prepared to encounter troubling ideas.

The letter set off immediate reactions from two sides engaged in an ongoing battle to frame the narrative. One side sees a culture dominated by a privileged majority that fosters (whether intentional or not) an inhospitable environment for certain minorities. The other side characterizes universities as populated primarily by “snowflakes” raised in a self-esteem-centered society that handed out trophies for everything and produced young adults ill prepared to face upsetting realities. Jeet Heer of *New Republic* called the letter a “perverse document” that attacked the academic freedom of teachers who value trigger warnings.¹ Others hailed it as a much-needed correction to the trend of giving in to forces on campus that use what is often described as the heckler’s veto or the shouting down of speakers to stop the sharing of particular views. Both sides are convinced of the virtue of their outrage.

What precipitated this letter? An apparent increased sensitivity within campus cultures drew scrutiny from the media over the past few years. In 2011, the Office of Civil Rights within the Department of Education advised universities on new standards for adjudicating sexual assault on campus through Title IX protections centered on creating a safe environment. In 2015, the Black Lives Matters movement leveraged rallies and the threat of a boycott from the University of Missouri football team to oust the school president on the grounds of failing to provide a safe environment for students of color. Online media is filled with stories of students demanding safety and sensitivity on campus.

On October 30, 2015, Yale University faculty member Erika Christakis responded to a request that Yalies be sensitive to cultural appropriation while picking their Halloween costumes by suggesting in an email that this violated the freedom of expression of students to choose to be subversive on a day that is traditionally associated with subversive behavior. Rather than censor costumes, perhaps students could confront their offenders in a respectful discussion. In response, students declared that they were hurt, fearful, and felt unsafe. When Christakis’s husband and fellow Yale faculty member Nicholas Christakis attempted to engage students in dialogue, they called him disgusting and smug and actively sought his termination. Bizarre videos posted on social media showed students cursing at Christakis while weeping and holding one another. Yale stood by the faculty members, but Erika Christakis resigned her position a few months later nonetheless.²

During the recent presidential election, someone chanted “Trump 2016” and “Build a Wall” among other things around the campus of Emory University. Responses to this included one student declaring, “We are in pain.” Another student said, “I don’t deserve to feel afraid at my school,” and another insisted, “I legitimately feared for my life.” School president James Wagner made clear he had heard their pain and would take measures to address the incident. “I cannot dismiss their expression of feelings and concern as motivated only by political preference or over-sensitivity.”³ Comedian Bill Maher disagreed and mocked the entire incident on his HBO talk show *Real Time with Bill Maher*.

Protests at University of California Berkeley over a planned speech by professional provocateur and Breitbart editor Milo Yiannopoulos turned violent. Yiannopoulos described himself as a “virtuous troll” who gets gratification from the emotional reactions of the left. He invites extreme reactions. Fires were set, and masked protesters physically assaulted Yiannopoulos supporters. Oddly, they claimed their motivation was to protect the campus from violence incited by Yiannopoulos against marginalized and vulnerable communities at Berkeley. Yiannopoulos canceled his speech and left the campus promising to return.⁴

Looking beyond the headlines, how can Christians formulate a reasonable alternative to the increasingly hostile rhetoric surrounding the issue of safe spaces and trigger warnings? We must begin by determining the key question at the center of it all: whether the freedom to address difficult issues in open dialogue supersedes the need to protect students from their emotional responses. We need to define our terms clearly, if possible, and identify strong arguments supporting this type of protection for students.

The evaluation of these issues grows more difficult if, as Alasdair MacIntyre suggests, our moral language is corrupted by emotivism. As a result, the two contesting sides operate from a different foundational understanding of the students, whether they are intellectually robust adults or a vulnerable class that needs protection.

We must rededicate ourselves to the principle that freedom of expression is the answer to troubling speech for everyone. This is consistent with the behavior of Jesus Christ and the apostle Paul, who both consistently engaged bad ideas with correction. If we accept that fear of reactions ought to restrict dialogue at universities, then we risk that this restrictive practice will spread beyond the campus. Our nobler aspirations — the desire to protect people from unpleasant emotions and a feeling of powerlessness — may corrupt our abilities as a community to navigate hard issues.

Free Speech and University Speakers

Does this defense of free speech mean unfettered access to university campuses for hate groups such as the Ku Klux Klan? The protection of free speech does not include a freedom to incite violence or criminal activity directly. That is not protected speech. Speech is protected from content-based discrimination, meaning you can't suppress speech before the fact based on what you fear might be said, but once speech crosses the line to actual incitement then it is no longer protected and the university must act to protect the students.

When I speak at a university campus I do so by invitation of a student group that is responsible to vet me properly. These groups want to further campus dialogue by inviting someone that challenges ideas. They do make mistakes, and student leaders share with me the regret they feel when they trusted a speaker who only sowed division. Several group representatives told me that their entire reason for asking our organization to come was to address past bad speech they felt responsible for with good speech that better represented them.

CAN WE EVEN DEFINE OUR TERMS?

Defining safe spaces proves harder than we might imagine. Frank Furedi's *What Happened to the University? A Sociological Exploration of Its Infantilisation* devotes a chapter to what exactly is meant by safe space when advocates demand it.⁵ It isn't simply a matter of physical distance. It extends to safety from "not merely physical but also symbolic, psychological, and cultural qualities."⁶

The idea isn't new. Prior to the last couple of years, the concept drew little attention and enjoyed some acceptance across disciplines, especially as it pertained to feminists and the homosexual community on campus. It also enjoyed some credibility in child development studies, where it was believed that when a student or child felt comfortable and able to voice ideas without judgment, he or she flourished intellectually. Furedi argues there is little to no evidence that this claim is true.⁷

Media awareness of safe spaces grew while exactly what people meant when they used the term became even more obscure. A new definition centered on student claims that helping them feel safe (specifically those perceived as vulnerable to discrimination) is a fundamental goal of the university. Perhaps advocates sensed that there was institutional support for that view from the Department of Education's expansion of Title IX protections and investigations under then-president Obama.

The definition of trigger warnings seems a bit more straightforward. Bloggers, social media users, and teachers provide a warning to their audience that they are about to address sensitive matters that might be upsetting. "Advocates for trigger warnings claim that they offer protection from words and images that would retraumatise people who have previously suffered a traumatic incident."⁸ This also affords the teacher the opportunity of cooperating in what is commonly called virtue signaling. The teacher who offers trigger warnings makes it clear to anyone paying attention that he understands the pain and struggles of his audience.

REASONABLE DEFENSES OF SAFE SPACES AND TRIGGER WARNINGS

In January of 2016, the president of Northwestern University, Morton Schapiro, published a defense of safe spaces on campus.⁹ The short editorial framed his defense with two anecdotes. The first centered on black students at a table refusing to invite two white students to join them because the white students were trying to step out of their comfort zone and meet people from different backgrounds. The black students just wanted to have lunch with friends and weren't interested in being a part of the white students' cultural education.

The second anecdote involved a university plan to put a multicultural office in a building called The Black House that was intended to be the center for black social life on campus.

This building offered black students a place of cultural comfort. The university decided not to place the office in The Black House, a decision that met the approval of a Jewish alumnus who shared that her comfort in the Hillel House was an important part of her campus experience. Schapiro argues that it is perfectly acceptable to accommodate desires to have a safe space.

Schapiro's definition of safe space doesn't appear to match the more broadly argued concept of safe spaces with regard to the campus protests mentioned above. His examples sound like something much more limited — freedom of association. Should Schapiro decide to champion fully the idea that groups ought to be free to limit or open their association with others as they see fit without interference of the government or university administrations, he will find a great many allies among those currently being critical of a defense of safe spaces.

Unfortunately, freedom of association has been undermined over the past decade, with Christian organizations on campuses being told that they cannot limit their officers to people that affirm belief in Christianity.¹⁰ Perhaps Schapiro only advocates for this sort of freedom for certain groups, but he doesn't clarify that point. If freedom of association does not cover clubs restricting people openly opposed to the group's founding principles from becoming officers in that group, then how can it possibly be the basis of an institution's defending the rights of minorities to associate based on content of beliefs or identity criteria?

Heer defends the concept of trigger warnings by arguing that the University of Chicago letter to incoming students is objectionable, since it negatively pressures professors who might otherwise include trigger warnings out of a genuine desire to spare the feelings of their students. Angus Johnston of CUNY tweeted his displeasure and provided a more thorough defense of trigger warnings elsewhere.¹¹ He does not support mandatory trigger warnings, which have been demanded by some student activists, but he supports each teacher considering the classroom as a shared space. In his class, a rape victim deserves a warning before being confronted with material that might expose her to discussion of that subject on a level she hasn't experienced before. A parent who lost a child might be unusually affected by the story of Emmitt Till. Specific explanations are best. Broadly stated general warnings only serve to heighten the sense that studying is an emotionally precarious enterprise by its very nature. Johnston makes a leap from there to insisting that Northwestern's position on trigger warnings creates hostility toward teachers who find them helpful.

Johnston's position seems reasonable. The problem is that those demanding trigger warnings don't always play by his rules. For example, Johnston allows students to leave class if triggered, but he holds them responsible for the material they miss while gathering their emotions. He treats it no differently than an absence.

Does this form of self-policing work? A *New Yorker* article by Jeannie Suk Gerson entitled "The Trouble with Teaching Rape Law" in December of 2014 addresses an example of practical problems with leaving it to the instructor's discretion.¹² Gerson details the move toward restricting the teaching of rape law in law school due to

complaints of the triggering nature of the material. She states that “about a dozen” new criminal law teachers at multiple institutions are ceasing to teach rape law in their courses. The need to be sensitive to the emotional fragility of students leads schools to refrain from teaching aspects of law to students of the law. These teachers freely choose to edit their content, but they aren’t motivated by academic aims. The fear of complaints motivates them. As reasonable as Johnston’s arguments are, it is understandable why the University of Chicago’s administration felt the need to issue an institutional statement.

FREE SPEECH VERSUS EMOTIONAL SECURITY

The core issue centers on free speech versus emotional security in public discourse. No one argues against people being allowed to shield themselves from unpleasant realities either temporarily or even permanently, should they wish. I would argue that it is unhealthy to avoid truth intentionally for fear that it will be upsetting, but that is a personal choice. This discussion centers on the university campus and whether restrictions are reasonable in that context. Isn’t it reasonable to assume that students attend universities to pursue higher learning? Learning, especially learning that we have been wrong, can be a stressful and upsetting process. It requires a commitment to *truth* over sensitivity. Pursuit of education ought to be the enterprise of the courageous that dare to believe that greater knowledge will cultivate a greater person.¹³ Arguments that center on demands for safety and trigger warnings begin with an entirely different idea of the student. As Furedi says, we begin our relationship with students assuming they are fragile and in need of our protection.¹⁴

In his book *After Virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre asks the question, what would our moral reasoning look like if people acted in all practical purposes as if emotivism were true? “Emotivism,” MacIntyre writes, “is the doctrine that all evaluative judgments and more specifically all moral judgments are nothing but expressions of preference, expressions of attitude or feeling, insofar as they are moral or evaluative in character.”¹⁵

Under this view, stating, “Abortion is wrong,” ought not be understood as an accurate or verifiable statement on the nature of killing unborn human life. It ought to be understood as saying, “I dislike abortion, so you should as well,” or “Abortion? Yech!” How we feel about things ultimately becomes elevated, as do the passions by which we advocate for those things we feel most strongly. MacIntyre suggests that this is exactly the world of moral consideration in which we find ourselves living. The moral language may sound similar, but it has been corrupted by emotivism.

This offers clarity as to why students in the middle of these controversies so often seek recognition for the extreme level to which they have been emotionally upset by events. The emotion communicates something important and must be recognized. Combine this with what Mary Ann Glendon characterizes as our tendency to verbalize our desires in terms of rights talk, and what’s happening might be coming into focus. Our entire evaluative process of right and wrong, good and bad, begins from a different

foundation. To many of us, our moral statements have truth value and communicate something of objective importance. For others, the most important aspect of those statements is the underlying emotion. The meaning resides in the passion or the intent.

REAFFIRMING THE PURPOSE OF THE UNIVERSITY AS A MARKETPLACE OF IDEAS

Where do we go from here? The institution that started this discussion penned a magnificent document in its Report of the Committee on Freedom of Expression. The University of Chicago calls for a reaffirmation that the purpose of the university is to be a marketplace of ideas defined by robust collisions of competing views. This freedom of expression will sometimes cause discomfort or emotional upheaval. The report quotes Hanna Holburn Gray: "Education should not be intended to make people comfortable, it is meant to make them think."¹⁶

Any strong commitment to a principle will at some point put the principle at odds with other considerations. The fact that people will be offended in environments that challenge their views of the world — whether or not those views survive the challenge — is not sufficient reason to abandon the vigorous pursuit of knowledge for a kinder and gentler environment. This is a teachable moment. It affords us the opportunity to resolutely define for all, yet again, the idea of higher education and public discourse. Bad speech is *always* best answered with good speech.

DIALOGUE AND THE BIBLE

The Bible models the principle of answering bad speech with good speech. Jesus corrects wrong ideas with truth. He held the power and authority to shut down whomever He wished, and yet that is not the model He provides. When He was young, He was found in the temple courts asking questions that astonished the crowd. He confronted the authorities that questioned Him on healing on the Sabbath in public dialogue. Paul spoke at synagogues, churches, and to the people of Athens in an effort to correct bad teaching with good, once staying up all night to do so before he left town.

Harold O.J. Brown points out that in the Christian theological tradition heresy (wrong teaching) implies orthodoxy (right beliefs), but our knowledge of heresy most often precedes the best articulation of orthodoxy. Truth is always truth, but it required someone teaching a wrong thing to force theologians to better articulate the right things. There appears to be a foundation of engagement in the Christian worldview that isn't easily ignored.¹⁷

The gospel upsets others by sharing the truth of their troubled position before God. We do so to lead them to a truth that will restore them. That is an important cautionary note when confronting the issue of safe spaces and trigger warnings with a group of people that operate within a moral framework driven by their emotions. Our

good arguments are offered to lead them and others to a truth that will restore them to a right intellectual relationship with their world (among other benefits of salvation).

We must always do so remembering the admonition to, “if possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men” (Rom. 12:18 NASB). It is tempting to further exasperate others by hurling insults at them, like calling them “snowflakes.” When Christians counter ugly rhetoric with equally aggressive responses, we buy into the lie that a strong response requires matching not just idea for idea but insult for insult. We don’t prove our resolve by abandoning respectful dialogue.

It is impossible for moral commitments to be free of complication. The complication raised by a commitment to free speech and the free exchange of ideas is that we are all guaranteed to encounter bad and dangerous ideas. The desire to spare the feelings of others may be admirable, but silencing bad ideas offers them a veneer of power that they do not deserve. The best strategy is to draw them out into the light of day and take them on, however painful that process might be to us all. We cannot allow a short-term desire to limit discomfort negatively impact our whole culture’s ability to discuss openly the most important moral issues of our age.

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NOTES

1. Jeet Heer, “The University of Chicago Is Attacking Academic Freedom,” *New Republic*, August 2016, <https://newrepublic.com/minutes/136303/university-chicago-attackingacademic-freedom>.
2. Anemona Hartocollis, “Yale Lecturer Resigns after Email on Halloween Costumes,” *New York Times*, December 7, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/08/us/yalelecturer-resigns-after-email-on-halloween-costumes.html>.
3. Max Kutner, “Emory Students Explain Why ‘Trump 2016’ Chalk Messages Triggered Protests,” *Newsweek*, March 25, 2016, <http://www.newsweek.com/emory-trump-chalkprotests-440618>.
4. Shortly after this incident, Yiannopoulos’s platform as a free speech advocate took a major hit. A sufficient airing of his views turned up an interview where he appears to celebrate sexual relationships between older gay men and young boys struggling with their sexuality. Greater information accomplished what no amount of disruption of his speeches could, helping many conservatives understand that he wasn’t the champion of free speech they wanted.
5. Frank Furedi, *What’s Happened to the University? A Sociological Exploration of Its Infantilisation* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), 70–88.
6. *Ibid.*, 71.
7. *Ibid.*, 73–74.
8. *Ibid.*, 147.
9. Morton Schapiro, “I’m Northwestern’s President. Here’s Why Safe Spaces for Students Are Important,” *The Washington Post*, January 15, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/how-to-create-inclusive-campus-communities-first-create-safeplaces/2016/01/15/069f3a66-bb94-11e5-829c-26ffb874a18d_story.html?utm_term=ca93c09fb95b.

10. Kevin Drum, "Campus Christian Groups Should Be Allowed to Remain Christian," *Mother Jones*, June 10, 2014, <http://www.motherjones.com/kevin-drum/2014/06/campuschristian-groups-should-be-allowed-remain-christian>.
11. Angus Johnston, "Why I'll Add a Trigger Warning," *Inside Higher Ed*, May 29, 2014, <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2014/05/29/essay-why-professor-adding-triggerwarning-his-syllabus>.
12. Jeannie Suk Gerson, "The Trouble with Teaching Rape Law," *The New Yorker*, December 15, 2014, <http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/trouble-teaching-rape-law>.
13. Christian parents regularly ask me what they can do to prepare their children to be confronted with ideas that challenge the Christian faith. I encourage them to teach their children to think critically. Protecting people from ideas tends to introduce the suspicion that those ideas are more powerful than they are.
14. Furedi, 28.
15. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 11–12.
16. "Report of the Committee on Freedom of Expression," University of Chicago, <http://provost.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/documents/reports/FOECommitteeReport.pdf>.
17. Harold O. J. Brown, *Heresies: Heresy and Orthodoxy in the History of the Church*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1988), 4-5