

The art of taking offence | Coffee House

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The emerging witch-hunt culture would be an object of half-amused contempt, were we still protected, as we were until recently, by the robust law of libel. It is still possible to laugh at the absurdity of it all, if you sit at home, avoiding contact with ignorant and malicious people, and getting on with real life – the life beyond social media. Unfortunately, however, ignorant and malicious people have discovered a new weapon in their unremitting assault on the rest of us, which is the art of taking offence.

I was brought up to believe that you should never give offence if you can avoid it; the new culture tells us that you should always take offence if you can. There are now experts in the art of taking offence, indeed whole academic subjects, such as ‘gender studies’, devoted to it. You may not know in advance what offence consists in – politely opening a door for a member of the opposite sex? Thinking of her sex as ‘opposite’? Thinking in terms of ‘sex’ rather than ‘gender’? Using the wrong pronoun? Who knows. We have encountered a new kind of predatory censorship, a desire to take offence that patrols the world for opportunities without knowing in advance what will best supply its venom. As with the puritans of the 17th century, the need to humiliate and to punish precedes any concrete sense of why.

I recall the extraordinary case of Boris Johnson and the burka. In the course of discussing the question whether the full facial covering should be banned here, as elsewhere in Europe, Johnson humorously remarked that a person in a burka has a striking resemblance to a letterbox. He was right. A woman in a burka resembles a letterbox much as a man in white tie resembles a penguin or a woman in feathers resembles a chicken.

It was obvious to anyone with a smattering of intellect that Johnson had no intention to give offence. However, there was political mileage in taking offence – so at once offence was taken. One ridiculous Lord (a Cameron creation) told us that the party whip should be withdrawn from Boris; MPs and public figures fell over each other in the rush to display their shock and distress that our Muslim fellow-citizens should have been so grievously offended; even the Prime Minister stepped in to reprimand her former Foreign Secretary. Virtue-signalling was the order of the day. A kind of hysterical fear swept away all the important considerations that Johnson was putting before his readers, so that everyone, friend and foe alike, ran for shelter. We are not guilty, was the collective cry of the time-servers and wimps that govern us.

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In reaction to this madness I ask myself who it is, in the matter of the burka, that habitually gives offence, and who it is that strives not to take it. We live in a face-to-face society, in which strangers look each other in the eye, address each other directly, and take responsibility for what they say. This custom is not just a fashion. It is deeply implanted in us by a thousand-year old religious and legal tradition, by the Enlightenment conception of what citizenship means, and by a literary and artistic

culture that tells us that we are in everything duty bound to see the other as on equal terms with the self. Being face to face with strangers is at the root of our political freedom.

I was brought up in that freedom. I cannot easily accept that people should appear in public ostentatiously concealing their face from me. The British believe that strangers deal openly with each other and are accountable for their looks and their words. It is natural for them to take offence at those who brazenly hide their face, while nevertheless claiming all the rights and privileges of citizenship. I certainly feel awkward in the presence of such people, and suspect that they are abusing the trust that we spontaneously extend to strangers. Nevertheless, it seems to me a singular virtue in the British that they strive not to take offence, when standing before a black letterbox, wondering where their message should be posted.

No sensitive person, however ignorant he might be of the Muslim faith, would fail to take off his shoes when entering a mosque – not because he feared the reaction of the worshippers, but because he knew that long-standing custom requires this, and that not to observe that custom is to show disrespect for a sacred space. Somehow we are supposed to forget that principle when it comes to long-standing customs of our own. For us too there are sacred spaces, and the public square is one of them: it is the space that belongs to others, not to you, and where you meet those others face to face. When we encounter those who refuse to accept this we are supposed to think that the entitlement to take offence rests entirely with them, and the tendency to give offence entirely with us.

Is it not time to get this whole matter into perspective, and to recognise that we must live together on terms, that Muslims must learn to laugh at themselves as the rest of us do, and that the art of taking offence might be a profitable business to the experts, but is a huge loss to everyone else?