

# Imposing orthodoxy

## Left-wing activists are using old tactics in a new assault on liberalism

It is possible to detect eerie echoes of the confessional state of yore

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Sep 4th 2021

Liberalism was forged in the revolt against the confessional state that had ruled Europe for more than a millennium. In medieval Europe the Roman Catholic church employed a transnational army of black-coated clerics who demanded obedience on all matters spiritual and moral, and had a monopoly in education. The Reformation introduced religious competition, strengthening the confessional state. John Calvin crushed dissent in Geneva with imprisonment, exile and execution. Henry VIII took to boiling dissenters alive. The Roman church invented the Inquisition and the Index of Forbidden Books.

Liberalism started to pick apart this fusion of church and state 350 years ago. John Milton wrote that if the waters of truth “flow not in a perpetual progression they sicken into a muddy pool of conformity and tradition”. Baruch Spinoza insisted that scripture must be interpreted like any other book. David Hume and John Stuart Mill argued that the best way to establish truth is by vigorous debate.

The fruit of this thinking was plucked in three revolutions. In America’s, Thomas Jefferson called “the loathsome combination of church and state” the root of most of the world’s ills. The French also established a secular republic. The gradualist English revolution left the Church of England intact but marginalised.

Yet something extraordinary is happening in the West: a new generation of progressives is reviving methods that uncannily resemble those of the confessional state, with modern versions of loyalty oaths and blasphemy laws. And this effort is being spearheaded in the heartland of Anglo-Saxon liberalism—often by people who call themselves liberals. Here is how the old tactics are being revived.

**Imposing orthodoxy.** Today’s orthodoxy is sustained by an intellectual elite instead of a spiritual one. Their natural home is the university. Some 70-80% of right-leaning academics and doctoral students in Britain and America say that their departments are hostile environments, according to Eric Kaufmann, of Birkbeck College, London.

The progressive left is even more dominant among students. There's nothing new about left-wing student revolts, but the protests of the 1960s were against the remnants of the confessional state: radicals at Berkeley in California turned Sproul Plaza into a free-speech zone, where anything could be said, and People's Park into a free-for-all zone, where anything could be done. Today's radicals demand the enforcement of codes of behaviour and speech. A poll of more than 4,000 four-year college students for the Knight Foundation in 2019 found that 68% felt that students cannot say what they think because their classmates might find it offensive.

**Proselytising.** Religious faiths have always had a vanguard, such as the Jesuit order, who see it as their job to move the boundaries of belief and behaviour towards righteousness. The vanguard of the woke revolution are young activists. Belief in foundations of liberalism such as free speech declines with each generation. The Pew Research Centre notes that 40% of millennials favour suppressing, in various unspecified ways, speech deemed offensive to minorities, compared with 27% among Gen Xers, 24% among baby-boomers and only 12% among the oldest cohorts.

Progressives replace the liberal emphasis on tolerance and choice with a focus on compulsion and power. As in many religions, righteous folk have a duty to challenge immorality wherever they find it. They find a lot of it, believing that white people can be guilty of racism even if they don't consciously discriminate against others on the basis of race, because they are beneficiaries of a system of exploitation. Classical liberals conceded that your freedom to swing your fist stops where my nose begins. Today's progressives argue that your freedom to express your opinions stops where my feelings begin.

**Expelling heretics.** The new confessional state enforces ideological conformity by expelling heretics from their jobs, a practice that liberals shed much blood trying to eradicate. In academia this is becoming wearily familiar.

In 2018 Colin Wright, a post-doctoral student at Penn State University, wrote two articles arguing that sex is a biological reality not a social construct, a statement that would once have been uncontroversial. Critics posted a warning that "Colin Wright is a Transphobe who supports Race Science" and sent emails to search committees condemning him. Sympathetic academics told him privately that they could not offer him a job as it was "too risky".

**Book banning.** In Restoration England Oxford University burned the works of Hobbes and Milton in the great quad next to the Bodleian Library. Today academics put trigger warnings on books, alerting students to the dangers of reading them. Young publishers try to get controversial books "cancelled".

Though they have failed on their highest-profile targets such as J.K. Rowling (publishers have to make money), they are succeeding with lesser fry, creating an atmosphere in which senior editors are less likely to bet on unknown authors with controversial opinions. Alexandra Duncan, a white American, even cancelled her own book, "Ember Days", after writing from the point of view of a black woman, something that is now dismissed as "cultural appropriation".

**Creeds.** Churches demanded that people sign a statement of religious beliefs, like the Anglican church's 39 Articles, before they could hold civil office. The University of California (uc) is doing something similar. Applicants for faculty posts have to complete statements about how they will advance diversity and inclusion.

These are worthy goals. But Abigail Thompson, until recently chair of maths at uc Davis and a lifelong liberal, points out that uc's scoring system rewards a woke view of how to realise them. In 2019 the life-sciences department at uc Berkeley rejected 76% of applicants on the basis of their diversity statements without looking at their research records.

**Blasphemy.** Scotland, a cradle of the Enlightenment, abolished the crime of blasphemy in March. At the same time, however, it reintroduced it by creating new offences such as "stirring up hatred" and "abusive speech"—punishable by up to seven years in prison.

The analogy with the past has its limits: no one is getting burnt at the stake. But it is a useful reminder that liberal values such as tolerance cannot be taken for granted. They were the product of centuries of argument and effort. The liberal state is still much younger today than the confessional state was when liberalism replaced it.

*This article appeared in the Briefing section of the print edition under the headline "Echoes of the confessional state"*