

Psychologist: Social Justice the new Religious Fundamentalism

Religious believers sometimes say that atheism is a “faith,” and in that sense a religion. That’s debatable because they’re using the word ‘faith’ ambiguously, and trading on that ambiguity. But according to NYU social psychologist Jonathan Haidt, there is a scientific sense in which a relatively new, secular “religion” of “social justice” is entrenching itself among students on America’s campuses.

He’s got a cogent point.

IT0 has run [several pieces](#) about Haidt’s ideas before. He’s not a conservative or even religious; he self-identifies as a liberal Democrat. Yet he’s alarmed by “the lack of ideological diversity” among faculty and students, which he sees as causing a “[breakdown of discourse](#).” As he sees it, such stifling orthodoxy can never be good for higher education, which thrives when opposing views are permitted and given a fair hearing.

But, suggests Haidt, it appears that many colleges and universities are hosting what is not merely a stifling orthodoxy, but also one that exhibits a few key characteristics of *religious* orthodoxy.

That’s the thesis of a lecture he gave a few weeks ago: “The American University’s New Assault on Free Speech,” organized by the Manhattan Institute in New York City. It’s summed up in an article with the provocative title: “[This New Religion Is Causing an Existential Crisis at American Colleges and Universities, NYU Prof Says](#).” The article includes a podcast link to the lecture.

Thus: "There is an extremely intense, fundamental social justice religion that's taking over, not all students, but a very strong [space] of it, at all our colleges and universities. They are prosecuting blasphemy and this is where we are."

What does he mean by "a very strong space"?

So my research is on moral judgement, moral psychology, in my book the Righteous Mind, I give three principles of moral psychology. And the third principle is 'morality binds and blinds.' It's just a fact that as humans, we are really good at making something sacred. Maybe it's a rock, tree ... book, a person...We make something sacred, we worship it, circle around it, often literally circling. ... When you do that, you bind yourself together, you trust each other, you have a shared sacred object and you go forth into battle...

That's what campus social-justice warriors are doing. Accordingly, they treat those who disagree with them as heretics or blasphemers. In religion, people seen as heretics or blasphemers are not dialogue partners; they are simply to be silenced, punished, and ostracized. And that's what's been happening at many, many campuses.

Does this mean that combating such evils as racism, or hatred of those whose sexuality is not the heterosexual norm, is a bad thing"? Of course not.

But, says Haidt:

"There is no nuance, you cannot trade off any other goods with it. So if you organize around fighting racism, fighting homophobia, fighting sexism, again all good things, but when they become sacred, when they become essentially objects of worship, fundamentalist religion, then when someone comes to

class, someone comes to your campus, and they say the rape culture is exaggerated, they have committed blasphemy.”

Ironically, then, the atmosphere on many campuses has become just as rigid as the fundamentalist religious orthodoxy students generally find so repellent. It appears to take honest, progressive thought-leaders like Haidt to call that out and give others the courage to do something about it.

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