

Campus Wokeness and the Evolution of Profanity

Last month, the University of Southern California [removed](#) a business professor from his classroom after he said a Chinese word that is pronounced similarly to the N-word.

Warning his students against using filler words during presentations, Professor Greg Patton gave examples such as “um,” “like.” and – in an effort to be inclusive of Chinese students – *ne ga* (那). Needless to say, this word, which translates to “that,” has no etymological relation to the English racial slur.

But a group of USC students wrote a letter to their administration claiming that, by simply hearing a word that is “a clear synonym” (they meant “homophone” but that’s far from the dumbest thing in this letter) of a slur, they had been “burdened to fight with our existence in society.” I think they meant “fight for,” but I guess when you’re this triggered the last thing on your mind is proofreading.

In reply, the business school dean, Geoffrey Garrett, wrote, “It is simply unacceptable for faculty to use words in class that can marginalize, hurt and harm the psychological safety of our students.”

The whole thing reminded me of an *Atlantic* article from last year. After Beto O’Rourke dropped an F-bomb on the campaign trail, linguist John McWhorter [jumped to the would-be president’s defense](#).

Profanity, McWhorter explained in his article, has evolved over time. He outlines three periods, which I’ll label the religious, the decorous, and the inclusive. The typical curses of the religious period include theological terms like “damn” and “hell.” The decorous period focused on modesty, so words

relating to sex, excrement, and the body parts involved therein became taboo. McWhorter's argument is that Beto's F-bomb was not as shocking as it would have been a few decades ago because today we've mostly completed the transition from the decorous period to the inclusive period. Crass words about bodily functions are tolerable, derogatory names for minorities are not.

This division is useful in that it reveals what each era believed to be sacred. From the earliest days of civilization through the Middle Ages, it was God or the gods. Speaking loosely of divine things risked calling down divine wrath. Profanity was literally profane, in the sense of being sacrilegious. By the Renaissance, however, the ancient dread was fading. Shakespeare's plays are loaded with expletives like "Zounds!" ([short for "God's wounds"](#)).

In the Victorian era, propriety was king. The survival of society depended on the individual and the state being regulated according to rational, hierarchical principles. This extended to one's body, which was expected to be controlled at all times. Such a way of thinking leaves little room for the body's less presentable parts and functions. Even the word "leg" came to be [considered](#) too sexy.

It's no accident that the curse words of this era were almost all synonyms for human bodily parts and functions. To talk about what happened in the bedroom or the bathroom was to undermine civilization itself.

In the present inclusive period, sacredness has passed from religion and propriety to diversity and human dignity. In many ways, this is a step in the right direction. Surely a word that dehumanizes an entire group of people ought to be more offensive than a synonym for "butt." This belief in universal human worth draws from the doctrines of the *imago dei* and the Incarnation, though by severing them from their religious roots, the movement is quickly distorted and rendered absurd.

Today, we seem to have fallen back into the superstitious dread and magical thinking that defined the early days of the religious period of profanity. [The Code of Hammurabi](#), written down around 1750 BC in ancient Mesopotamia, declares that “[i]f a man has accused another of laying a *nêrtu* upon him, but has not proved it, he shall be put to death.” We aren’t exactly sure what a *nêrtu* is, but in context it appears to be some sort of spell. It is a series of words so fearsome that the penalty for falsely accusing someone of pronouncing them is death. Anyone accused of uttering a *kišpu*, presumably a less serious curse, was to be subjected to a trial by water. Dr. Patton is currently experiencing a similar ordeal.

The actions of USC’s administration betray the same superstitious fear of mere words. A teacher who maliciously utters slurs in the classroom ought to be punished. But what happened to Patton is different. Not only did he say the word without any hate in his heart; he didn’t say the word at all! We’ve all heard of a “victimless crime,” but this crime has no perpetrator.

In their complaint against him, Patton’s students implied that intent and knowledge do not matter, only a specific arrangement of sounds. Whenever they hear these sounds, they argue, violence has been committed against them, and anyone who questions their right to seek restitution for this supposed offense is guilty of further violence. And, in light of the now-fashionable theory of [generational trauma](#), that harm extends to their offspring as well.

In their extremism, they outdo even Hammurabi. The ancient lawgiver’s penalties may have been harsher, but he was wise enough to include protections against spurious accusations of cursing, and penalties for making such false accusations.

The decorous era of profanity from which we are emerging may have been prudish, but it was never so irrationally hostile toward those who violated its taboos. The modern zealots of

social justice have more in common with the worshippers of Baal than they might care to admit.

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