

## Parresia (παρρησία) – a word Christians must teach the world (again!)

The flexibility with which the English language embraces new words is one of the reasons it has proven so adaptable, but sometimes the purist in me rebels against this enthusiasm for semantic novelty. A recent trigger of such exasperation is the neologism 'woke'. How did this past tense of an irregular verb turn into an adjective? And what exactly has its newly defined meaning to do with being 'awake'? I confess I am rather mystified by the speed and ubiquity of this addition to the dictionary. However, since English is constrained by no authority except usage, I must yield to the *vox populi* and accept it into my vocabulary.

For any linguistic conservatives who have somehow succeeded in being insulated from its invasion, let me explain what 'woke' now means. That it has no simple synonym is perhaps the reason it has been adopted so widely; there is a huge range of applications. Common to them, however, is the apparently innocuous idea that we have a right not to be offended by the way others speak or write. Slander and libel, of course, have long been recognised as civil torts, but to support a claim for legal redress these kinds of defamation must be proven to be untrue. 'Woke-ness' is subject to no such limitation. Any language that challenges deeply held personal convictions is censured by it, even if those convictions reflect only subjective experience and have no verifiable basis in objective fact at all. It thus represents a major concession to postmodern scepticism about the accessibility of 'truth'. There is 'my truth' and 'your truth', but any claim to truth that compels universal acceptance by virtue of its evidential support or logical coherence is ruled implicitly authoritarian and discriminatory. Language is a social construct that I am entitled to mould to my own taste.

I am reminded of Alice's shrewd observation in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*:

*"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less."*

*"The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things."*

*"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master – that's all."*

It was the laudable desire to minimise offence to vulnerable minorities that sparked this 'woke' culture-war. A much discussed example will suffice to illustrate the point: if I belong to the transsexual minority whose psychologically experienced gender does not match their biologically defined sex, the language of others must be modified so that I do not feel excluded. Thus, words like 'man' or 'woman' become potentially sexist tools of oppression by the 'binary' majority.

No one of course can quarrel with a moral imperative that requires tactful sensitivity to other people's feelings. But the extremes to which the 'woke' movement is taking this has begun to imperil an even more fundamental value, namely **freedom of speech**. Those who wish to examine the credentials of controversial points of view are finding it impossible to express their doubts without risking a torrent of indignant protest. Scholarly discussion in universities, which previously would have been protected by the hallowed tradition of academic freedom, is being stifled by unprecedented censorship, often administered by students themselves.

In Islamic countries, where blasphemy is still a crime, and in communist countries, where ideological conformity is synonymous with patriotism, one expects such muzzling of dissident opinion. But its appearance in the West is disturbing. The ironic thing is that this censorship is being wielded not in the name of some reactionary creed, but in defence of thoroughly 'liberal' and 'modern' ideas.

As a gay Christian, I find the situation acutely embarrassing. For I have been personally liberated by the way society has embraced diversity of sexual orientation in the last fifty years. I welcome the determination to identify and prosecute 'hate-crime' too. The reluctance of my conservative-evangelical colleagues to reconsider their position on homosexuality has been deeply frustrating. For many years I bit my tongue,

accepting self-censorship as the price of remaining in fellowship with much-respected fellow-believers. When I was eventually forced to declare 'my truth', I was vilified and my books were destroyed.

**So if anyone should be supportive of this new 'woke'-consciousness, surely it should be me? But, on the contrary, I am appalled by it. For any 'truth' that must be defended by censorship betrays itself as no truth at all. We cannot silence bigots by emulating their intolerance, but only by bravely absorbing their irrational gibes and resolving to base our own arguments on logic and facts supported by evidence.**

In the providence of God, the evangelistic zeal of the early Christians was facilitated by a secular world that in some measure at least accepted this. A key characteristic of Athenian democracy was *parresia* – a noun that reflected a citizen's right and duty to speak the truth plainly in a context of free and open public debate. In his account of the early preaching of the apostles, Luke exploits the positive connotations of this word among his Greek-speaking readers:

*When they saw the courage (parresia) of Peter and John, and perceived that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus. (Acts 4:13)*

The idea, if not the word, is present too in John's record of Jesus' defence to the Roman governor, Pilate:

*'For this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth'. (John 18:37)*

But perhaps the most passionate appeal to the virtue of *parresia* is Paul's:

*We have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly, we commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God. (2 Corinthians 4:2-3)*

It is to the shame of Christians that we must look to the writings of atheists to defend such freedom of speech today. Richard Dawkins, author of *The God Delusion*, was recently stripped of an award by the American Humanist Association because he dared to imply that there is a valid academic discussion to be had regarding how the words 'man' and 'woman' should be defined, a suggestion the new advocates of 'woke'-ness found 'demeaning' to trans individuals (Times 21/4/21). The journalist, Matthew Syed, is another prominent unbeliever who has written uncompromisingly about the obscurantist folly of 'pitting my truth against your truth' and eschewing rational argument (Sunday Times 4/4/21).

But where are the Christian voices in this vital contemporary debate? Most on the liberal wing of the church have swallowed post-modern hermeneutics whole, so they have no intellectual legs to stand on. The conservative evangelicals on the other hand, ensconced in their self-congratulatory ghetto, have proven themselves just as incapable of disagreeing respectfully as the 'woke' thought-police are. In the defining culture-war of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, the Christians have either surrendered or withdrawn behind defensive barricades to fight among themselves.

Ask the believers in Russia, China and Syria. They will tell you. In the absence of *parresia*, evangelism becomes a crime, Bibles are burned, and Christians persecuted. Get back in the pulpit and show the world how to use freedom of speech graciously and winsomely in the marketplace of ideas – or that hard-won privilege may be taken away from you!

*Jesus replied: "I have spoken openly (parresia) to the world." (John 18:20)*