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### Free Speech Through the Lens of Quakerism

Schools at all levels— K-12 through university, public or private— ought to encourage diversity in opinion and perspective without fear of social punishment. Education should help students cultivate the skill of how to think rather than preaching what to think. My argument is backed by many of the six core Quaker values (simplicity, peace, integrity, community, equality, and stewardship), but most notably peace and equality. But, the opposing view can be, and is, equally defended by the same values. And that side of the debate seems to be winning in academia.

I have been a student at a Quaker school for 12 years. I am quite familiar with many Quaker schools and the shared ethos of each one. There is a trend amongst these schools that is rooted in good-faith, compassionate, humanitarian beliefs but in truth drastically curtails free speech within school grounds (I could cite actual documents, but in the spirit of anonymity, I will not, and will instead reference loosely). For the sake of preserving students' emotional safety, or "safety-ism," a term coined by Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt in their book, *The Coddling of the American Mind*, they are taught that offending is the gravest offense.<sup>1</sup> One can see that at its root, this thinking stems from empathy and seeks to put the emotional well-being of students first. But when applied, it produces the opposite effect. They advertise "suggested" language lists that advise students and families to avoid using certain words that could potentially offend an individual based on their culture or immutable characteristics. "Listening sessions," meetings that give those who feel offended a place to air their grievances with the offender, force the offender into silence. In exchange, the offender may retain their social standing, place on the committee, etc.

These practices objectively curtail students' freedom of speech. The importance of truly free speech is described by journalist Jonathan Rauch in his 1993 essay titled *Kindly Inquisitors*.

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<sup>1</sup> Lukianoff, Greg, and Jonathan Haidt. "Safe Spaces." In *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting up a Generation for Failure*, by Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt, 26-30. N.p.: Penguin Books, 2019.

Though his argument is not grounded in these Quaker values, it is essential to mention the timeless philosophical argument in favor of free speech. Through presenting the importance of adopting and retaining liberalism, he explains why free speech is vital to individual liberty. In a society where people are truly free, their speech must go unpunished. Otherwise, the notion that circulates is that “people who hold wrong and hurtful opinions should be punished for the good of society,” (Rauch, 6).<sup>2</sup> Now, on a small scale, this punishment is exactly as listed above: forced silence.

In the wake of the 2022 Oscars, after the actor Will Smith delivered a fierce slap to comedian Chris Rock after Rock made a bad joke, I wrote an article for my student news publication commenting on the fiasco and its relation to Quakerism, or more so its relation to its violation of Quaker values. In summation, I argued that holistically, the Quaker emphasis on peace teaches to repair conflict with humane debate. Humane debate needs to be emphasized above all else taught in school. Debate needs to be presented as a forum for all speech, popular or unpopular, to be sorted through. It is only through opposing speech that knowledge is disproved or gained, and without an opportunity to speak freely, individual, free-thinking knowledge will cease, ultimately receding into mindless groupthink that descends into intellectual chaos. This is just one example of how one can use basic Quaker principles to defend the right to truly free speech. Another, as I see it, is to use the testimony of equality. Quakers believe that because there is that of God in everyone, each person, regardless of race, class, or past sin, is equal in the eyes of God, and therefore, should be treated as such. This belief led Quakers to pioneer the abolitionist and womens’ suffrage movements. It can be applied, too, in settings of disagreement and discussion. If one emphasizes that everyone, in moral and intellectual knowledge, is equal, then no one has direct access to the truth.<sup>3</sup> If no one has sole access to a divine truth, then it is impossible to shut others down in debate. There is always room for disagreement, sure, and in fact, disagreement is encouraged, as it is central to debate, but there is a key difference between respectful disagreement and a shutting-down of opposing viewpoints.

So how can we sort out which interpretation of these Quaker values is correct? Ironically, discerning which argument is right can only be accomplished with a free exchange of ideas. In

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<sup>2</sup> Rauch, Jonathan. "New Threats to Free Thought." In *Kindly Inquisitors: The New Attacks on Free Thought*, Expanded ed., by Jonathan Rauch and George F. Will, 1-30. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Rauch, Jonathan, and George F. Will. *Kindly Inquisitors: The New Attacks on Free Thought*. Expanded ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014.

all academic institutions, there needs to be space to engage in this conversation without fear of condemnation or punishment from fellow students or administration. And that's at the very least. I beg, truly, that schools begin to consider fostering open debate forums and aim to value the right to speak freely rather than freely silencing speech. Let ideas be argued and criticized. Let students speak.