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Is there no longer room for debate?

by Matthias Küntzel

At 1pm on March 14, I arrived in Leeds to be told that the university, where I was to speak just four hours later, had cancelled my lecture on "Hitler's Legacy: Islamic Antisemitism and the Middle East". The decision came as something of a shock since nothing like this had happened to me before. Furthermore, the date for my talk and seminar series had been set four months earlier and the publicity had been out for weeks.

The second surprise: none of those responsible was ready to apologise for the cancellation or even explain why it had occurred. It was not until late that evening that the university's press officer called to tell me that "some people found your words controversial", presumably referring to the Muslim author of an e-mail of March 13, who had defined the very title of my lecture as "an open racist attack". "How dare you speak of Islamic antisemitism", he wrote, before expressing his hope that the university's vice-chancellor would "apologise to the Muslim community as a whole". A self-righteous and arrogant tone indeed, but no threat of violence.

In another missive on the same day a female Muslim student had stated, "I find this title profoundly offensive. I feel that this title threatens my security and wellbeing on campus." Again, not the slightest threat of violence. Nonetheless, the press officer informed me that "people might be injured". As the university could only provide four stewards, the event had to be cancelled.

The thing is, though, "some people" have "found my words controversial" at every university where I have spoken. Only in Leeds, however, were they able to prevent a discussion of the matters they found distasteful even without threatening violence. The university administration evidently sets greater store by the fact that some students disliked my talk's title than by the defense of freedom of speech. But even if there had been a security threat, responsibility would have lain with the enemies of academic freedom and cancelling my talk would have been tantamount to inviting them to do it again. Whether or not the threat was real, Leeds has set a dangerous precedent by suppressing critical discussion of one of Islam's less appealing aspects.

These aspects, which are the topic of my research, are of scientific and political relevance. If you refuse to discuss Islamic antisemitism, it becomes impossible fully to comprehend crucial aspects of the situation in the Middle East such as suicide bombing and Holocaust denial.

The facts on which my talks are based are not controversial. Nobody denies that between 1939 and 1945 Nazi Germany broadcast Goebbelsian antisemitism nightly to the Middle East on its Arabic short-wave radio service.

It is well known that the first leader of the Muslim Palestinians, Amin el-Husseini, lived in Berlin between 1941 and 1945 from where he disseminated a version of this antisemitism on the same short-wave radio.

It is also true that the same kind of Jew-hatred reappears in, for example, the Hamas Charter, which treats the antisemitic forgery, the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, as an authentic source and claims the Jews were responsible for both world wars. "Whenever there is war in the world," we read there, "it is they [the Jews] who are pulling the strings behind the scenes."

There is an argument to be had about the significance of these facts. But the facts themselves are not in dispute. You can have your own opinion. But you cannot have your own facts.

While some Muslims support the global struggle against antisemitism, others wish to prevent the mere mention of Islamic antisemitism in Britain. Leeds are playing into the hands of this second group.

In his press statement, Roger Gair, the university secretary, asserts that: "The decision to cancel a public lecture by Dr Küntzel has nothing to do with academic freedom, freedom of speech."

I have more than one reason to doubt this. "Should you invite him [Matthias Küntzel] in the future," says a letter from the head of the university's German department to those who invited me, "the university would look closely at the proposed content of the talk. I do not see this as censorship. The university has clear legal requirements to do this, designed to guarantee free speech but also to promote respect and tolerance".

I have always regarded Britain as a wonderful country, the only one in Europe that successfully resisted the Nazi onslaught, and the birthplace of freedom of speech. After Leeds I may have to revise my views. Or will there be a "post-Leeds-approach"? Today, Alex Just, president of the Oxford Union, invited me to speak there. "This invitation," he writes, "will not be retracted... It is in light of this example of what some might see as academic censorship that we are particularly keen to host you as a speaker."

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