

**The Voldemort Effect**  
**Magic Words & Taboo Talk**  
**By**  
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In one of Sigmund Freud's signature works, *Totem and Taboo*, the founder of psychoanalysis theorizes that religion began with "totemism," the worship of animals and artifacts serving as deified surrogate father figures. He theorized this was so based upon Darwin's "primal horde" hypothesis that, like other apes, human society originated in small hordes that, "stood under the rule of an older male, who governed by brute force, appropriated all the females, and belaboured or killed all the young males, including his own sons."<sup>1</sup> Eventually some of these sons united to overthrow and kill their domineering patriarch and, for a period, established more egalitarian societies that even gave rise to instances of matriarchy. But as the guilt of their patricidal act began to overwhelm them, they adopted animals, at first, and later erected totems to replace their dead fathers. "The surrogate for the father was perhaps used in the attempt to assuage the burning sense of guilt," Freud says, "and to bring about a kind of reconciliation with the father."<sup>2</sup> So, despite their initial attempts to destroy patriarchy and develop communities based more on cooperation and equality, Freud says after, "totemism had been established there began a development which may be described as a slow 'return of the repressed.'"<sup>3</sup>

From there, the physical totems evolved into hero worship, and the subsequent deification of humans, then into the "idea of a Highest being."<sup>4</sup> "The next step," according to Freud, "to worship only one god, was taken hesitantly, and at long last the decision was made to concede all power to one God only and not to suffer any other gods beside him. Only then was the grandeur of the father restored; the emotions belonging to him could now be repeated."<sup>5</sup> Christianity, according to this theory, bolsters patriarchal monotheism a step further by placing a punished and obedient son at the side of this invisible, all-powerful, all-knowing, ever-present, punitive Father. It is by emulating this suffering servant that we fulfill our religious obligation to our surrogate silverback in the sky.

So, the first point I wish to make is that religion, if Freud is correct, began as a form of father worship to reestablish and uphold social systems based on patriarchy, dominance, and authoritarian rule. If so, we have been psychologically and socially conditioned for centuries to favor dominator societies based on sexism and inequality, and to see ourselves as fallen individuals who deserved to suffer, and those among us who disobey the rules, who break with the status quo, either ideologically or by not resembling the social default—the successful white male in our society—deserve to be punished or ostracized, which would

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<sup>1</sup> Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, Vintage Books, A Division of Random House, New York, NY, 1939, 1967, p. 168.

<sup>2</sup> Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, Barnes & Noble Books, U.S., 1913, 2005, p. 137.

<sup>3</sup> Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, p. 170.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 171f.

explain why our justice system is the most punitive on Earth and mostly targets poor whites and nonwhites.

I also want to say a little about our psychological attitude toward totems before moving forward. For Freud's famous book, *Totem and Taboo*, could as easily have been entitled "Totem is Taboo." That's really the point of the book, that the things we revere the most are also the things we most fear. In fact, the word *revere* comes from the French word meaning, "fear." To show respect and reverence is to demonstrate fear. Irreverence and disrespect for established ways and beliefs is to show no fear of them. "Totemism," which Freud considered both "a religious as well as a social system,"<sup>6</sup> was founded upon what he called a kind of "holy dread"<sup>7</sup> It is the dread of the totems we are most attracted to and most revere that also makes them taboo, and those who do come into contact with them, unclean and untouchable. As Freud put it, "The violation of a taboo makes the offender [oneself] taboo."<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, this sense of "holy dread," or what, as kids, we called, "cooties," seems to be instinctive within us. It doesn't originate from religious commands but is innate. We automatically dread tampering with the things we revere, or coming into contact with those who do. Wilhelm Wundt, the very first person ever to call himself a psychologist, called, "taboo the oldest unwritten code of law of humanity,"<sup>9</sup> and Freud said, "It is generally assumed that taboo is older than the gods and goes back to the pre-religious stage."<sup>10</sup> In short, we don't have to be overly religious to believe some things are untouchable, including the things we're most attracted to. From kids running from each other on the playground to avoid being tagged and becoming "it," the thing everyone is running from, to the avoidance of speaking about forbidden subjects in polite company, to the poor in India with no choice but to undertake the lowliest of jobs and become untouchable in the process, to the ritual handwashing that defined the practices of the ancient Jewish Pharisees, to modern beliefs the Bible can't be questioned, that its truth is untouchable, to the simple feeling of discomfort we get when people mess with the way things are, with the things we've become accustomed to, with the routines and rituals of our daily lives, taboo, the sense of holy dread, remains an active and unconscious force in our lives.

I say all of this to make the point that totem and taboo is not a dead concept relative only to the study of our ancestors, nor reserved only for those among us with an ancient and superstitious religious mindset. Simultaneously dreading what we are most attracted to, not wishing to mess with the stuff we most like, is universal. It transcends time, religion, and ideology. And it is some of these ideological taboos that I especially want us to consider.

Today, for instance, though it is far from the most important matter we should be considering, there is much debate over whether it's appropriate for football players to kneel during the singing of the National Anthem. This form of protest, as you will recall, began last

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<sup>6</sup> Freud, Sigmund, *Totem and Taboo*, Barnes & Noble, New York, NY, 1913, 2005, p. 100.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

year when 49er quarterback, Colin Kaepernick began doing so in protest of police violence against black people. Despite being widely criticized and not being picked up by any team since the controversy began, Kaepernick's "taking the knee" form of protest has been gaining momentum, especially since Donald Trump referred to those players doing so as S.O.B.s.

I don't need to go into all that's being said against those "taking the knee." In one form or another they're being criticized, even demonized, for disrespecting the flag, or disrespecting our nation, or disrespecting our soldiers. In other words, they are committing taboo by violating some of our country's most revered ideas. And, if the President had his way, they would not be allowed to work or earn a living for doing so, they would become, like Colin Kaepernick, untouchable.

Yet, when we consider the mistreatment of nonwhites in this country, especially blacks, who were dragged here in chains from their native lands 300 years ago, enslaved and violated in every despicable way; then, once freed, treated as unequal and separate under the law for more than a century; and later, terrorized, lynched, burned and bombed by white supremacists; then, after the Civil Rights Bill, became the subject of a political drug war leading to the New Jim Crow era of mass incarceration that especially targets black people and their neighborhoods, who, today, represent nearly half of those in our swollen prisons; and are subject to racist voter suppression laws and gerrymandering, massive voter purges, and are still redlined into traditional black neighborhoods, disproportionately live in poverty, are unemployed, and undereducated. Under these diabolical circumstances, how can any of us in good conscience sing the National Anthem, let alone expect those most marginalized to honor the symbols of a country that has treated them and their ancestors so despicably without remorse, apology, or reparations?

I'm not supposed to say any of this am I? Speaking against the flag, being unpatriotic, is taboo in our nation. Yet what better way of illustrating my point than with the very word, *patriot*, which shares the same root as the word *patriarch*, both deriving from the Greek word meaning "father," *patrios*. It is forbidden for us to speak against his symbols, the flag and fatherland, to not stand, or sing, or place our hands over our hearts when the crowd pays tribute to him before his gladiators take to the field and wage symbolic war against each other in his honor. We live in a nation that continues to systematically marginalize, disenfranchise, impoverish, criminalize, and punish the descendants of those it once enslaved and tormented, but, somehow, nobody has a right to say this flag, this country, doesn't represent my values, it doesn't represent or care about me, and I can't honor these symbols until these wrongs are finally addressed.

Here's another recent example. Just this week, after the horrific and worst mass shooting in our history—if, that is, we ignore the genocide of the American Indian—conservative pundits and politicians expressed moral outrage against anyone bringing up gun control. They say it's too soon, when, the fact of the matter is, it's too late. Nevertheless, this tactic of making certain conversations taboo with claims they politicize the tragedy of others has been going on for a long time. In the late 1980s, broadcasters objected to playing ads against drunk driving as a teetotaler attempt to politicize the tragedy of others. In the early 1990s, the Department of Housing evaded serious conversations about homelessness by stating,

“Homelessness is too great a tragedy, individual and social, to politicize.”<sup>11</sup> During the 1992 Emmy awards actress Deidre Hall explained she wasn’t wearing a red AIDS awareness ribbon because doing so “politicizes human tragedy.” In 1994 Newt Gingrich blamed a fatal helicopter crash on President Clinton’s military budget and was criticized for politicizing the tragedy. A year later, the other side criticized Clinton for politicizing the Oklahoma City bombing by pointing out anti-government hate speech is part of the problem. When he spoke about instituting waiting periods and background checks after the shooting in Columbine, he had to defend himself against accusations of politicizing the tragedy. When Al Gore was running against George W. Bush, he too was accused of politicizing tragedy when questioning the right to carry guns after a church shooting in Fort Worth. “Since then,” *Slate* reporter Katy Waldman says, “practically every calamity you can name has been, in the eyes of some, unjustly politicized: Sept. 11, Hurricane Katrina, Sandy Hook, Washington Navy Yard, et cetera.”<sup>12</sup>

Since, as I said, taboo talk transcends ideology, I’ll also bring up recent examples of shutting down the speech of others by social progressives. Last month, former FBI Director, James Comey was silenced by angry students while attempting to deliver a convocation address to graduates at Howard University. While I am emotionally aligned with the rage of these students, I am gravely concerned by the emerging tactic of shutting down the speech of those we disagree with. Whether it is through the philosophy of Political Correctness that encourages the public shaming of those who say things they aren’t supposed to, or protesting the ideas of those we might disagree with on University campuses, controlling the meme pool by preventing the expression of certain ideas is supposed to be the morality of Fox News, of the Holy Inquisition, of Joseph McCarthy, not the tactics of liberals who have traditionally upheld freedom of speech for everyone, friend or foe.

The American Civil Liberties Union, the ACLU, has long upheld this principle by protecting the freedom of speech and assembly of some of the most despicable groups and persons I can think of. I know it’s a bitter pill to swallow, but determining the expression of some ideas should be forbidden, endangers freedom of speech for everyone. As the ACLU stated in its defense of a White Supremacist rally in Portland a few months ago, “If we allow the government to shut down speech for some, we all will pay the price down the line.”<sup>13</sup> After the deadly violence in Charlottesville just a short time ago, prompted by a White Supremacist gathering the ACLU defended in court, one of its Board members resigned, saying, “What’s legal and what’s right are sometimes different,” he said, adding that he “can’t facilitate Nazis murdering people.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>[http://www.slate.com/blogs/lexicon\\_valley/2016/06/12/the\\_orlando\\_shootings\\_and\\_politicizing\\_tragedy.html](http://www.slate.com/blogs/lexicon_valley/2016/06/12/the_orlando_shootings_and_politicizing_tragedy.html)

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.wweek.com/news/2017/05/29/acLU-of-oregon-says-mayor-ted-wheelers-attempt-to-quash-alt-right-rallies-violates-the-first-amendment/>

<sup>14</sup> [http://www.richmond.com/news/virginia/board-member-of-va-acLU-resigns-in-protest-of-group/article\\_2d030782-80bc-5f4b-b5ef-73d525a69a6b.html](http://www.richmond.com/news/virginia/board-member-of-va-acLU-resigns-in-protest-of-group/article_2d030782-80bc-5f4b-b5ef-73d525a69a6b.html)

I understand his sentiments, his outrage, and, agree, we can't facilitate murder. But the problem with shutting down the expression of ideas, with determining who can speak and who can't, in addition to endangering free speech, is that the ideas don't go away just because we can't hear them anymore. We learned this recently when the election of Donald Trump emboldened the voices of racists we haven't heard from in decades. When, furthermore, all we do is oppose symbols of racism by tearing down monuments, taking down flags, and changing street signs, we merely whitewash the language if we don't, foremost, tear down the systems of racism and injustice that continue to oppress people. If we create a society where racist words are never spoken and racist symbols have all been removed, we are in danger of tricking ourselves into believing racism no longer exists because we can't see or hear any evidence of it.

When these ideas are expressed, on the other hand, we know they are still there and that we not only have to address them through dialogue, but also by enacting laws that prevent them from being acted upon, and by finally creating new systems to replace institutional racism. In truth, we have done far more in Washington to counter racism by legalizing marijuana, which has since cut the number of stop and searches in half, than anyone has accomplished by shouting down speakers or demonstrators. We have done more right here in Spokane by working to instill Smart Justice practices into our criminal justice system than was accomplished by silencing the former FBI director in Washington, D.C.

The point of all this, again, is that there are certain ideas in our nation it is forbidden to talk about, even if they concern the very matters we should be openly, honestly, and civilly discussing with each other—racism, drunk driving, military spending, gun control, and so on. Much of this, I speculate, is because of this unconscious sense of “holy dread” within us that forbids the expression of certain ideas. That's why I call it the Voldemort Effect, after the *Harry Potter* villain who is considered so evil he's referred to as, “He who must not be named.” It's a good illustration of the way in which our fears, our dread of certain ideas, cause us to ascribe almost magical properties on them. That's why they're taboo, because if we come into contact with them, either by hearing forbidden words, or by messing with the Holy Word, we feel something terrible might happen.

This unconscious tendency to revert to a dominator culture, facilitated by patriarchy and taboo talk, prevents us from evolving into the egalitarian species so many of us long to become. Thus, to transcend our apish beginnings, we must surmount these ancient forces within us, the desire to be ruled over and protected by a domineering father figure, and our dread of violating our most cherished ideas, or of coming into contact with forbidden beliefs. In short, if we're going to become a more just people and build a more just society, we have to do a better job of talking and listening to each other—dreadful as that may sound.