

# **Omiliophobia**

## **Afraid of Speaking for Fear of Saying Something “Wrong”**

**By**  
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**April 9, 2023**

Liberalism and our liberal religion are both rooted in the Enlightenment belief in the inherent worth and dignity of every person. It is only through a deep commitment to this principle that some societies, including ours, would attempt to establish and maintain democracies in which every person has a voice in how they are to be governed. The continuation of these imperfect unions is dependent upon the strength of a society’s guarantee of freedom, reason, and tolerance, the only means by which human dignity can be meaningfully respected.

By freedom, we mean freedom of speech and freedom of participation. Every person has a right to express themselves without fear of persecution, prosecution, ostracization, demonization, termination, or any other legal or illegal ramifications for expressing their beliefs, no matter how contrary to the status quo. As importantly, freedom means every person has an equal right to access the benefits of society without prejudice against them, regardless of what they look like, their gender, their color, their nationality, their sexuality, or any other arbitrary quality of their identity.

By reason, we mean that our beliefs ought to be accepted and challenged by considering the empirical evidence and soundness of the thinking behind them, not by what the propogandists on Faux News and BSNBC tell us with extreme bias, or according to the fantasies and fanaticisms of social media mobs. Liberalism’s commitment to reason also means an individual must be trusted to think for oneself. In a free society there can be no orthodoxy, no doctrine, no truth enforced upon us by any authority, church, state, or otherwise. Free thinking is a cornerstone of a free society.

And by *tolerance* we mean that every member of society is expected to live peacefully and respectfully toward those with whom they might differ and disagree. Merely tolerating each other may be the least we can do but, in order to maintain respect for the inherent dignity of others, tolerance is all that is required of us. For tolerance is enough to acknowledge that every person deserves the same rights as us and ought to be free to go about their lives un-accosted by anyone else. Tolerance is the linchpin that unifies us amidst our diversity, and it is diversity that makes a society strong.

Today, however, the world’s democracies, including our own, are becoming increasingly divided because too many of us don’t respect those with whom we differ and disagree. Too many of us, on both the Right and Left, are quick to disinvite, displatform, disfellowship, demonize and otherwise disenfranchise our ideological opponents. According to Freedom House, our nation’s oldest nonpartisan organization devoted to promoting and defending democracy around the world, there have been sixteen years of consecutive decline in global freedom. This is so, according to its 2022 report, because, “In countries with long-established democracies, internal forces have exploited

the shortcomings in their systems, distorting national politics to promote hatred, violence, and unbridled power.”<sup>1</sup>

Democratic societies require civility, and civility requires us to at least tolerate hearing ideas we disagree with. Authoritarian societies, by contrast, forbid such freedom of expression and are quick to punish dissenters and heretics. From the Medieval Catholic Inquisitions to the 20<sup>th</sup> century McCarthy hearings, we know this to be so. This is the fundamental point of George Orwell’s dystopian horror novel, *1984*; that for authoritarian societies to maintain power, they must, above all, control the free flow of ideas by severely restricting freedom of speech. As a member of *1984*’s Ministry of Truth says, “We’re destroying words, scores of them, hundreds of them, every day. We’re cutting the language down to the bone ... In the end the whole notion of goodness and badness will be covered by only six words—in reality, only one word.”<sup>2</sup> *Newspeak*, as Orwell explains, “was designed not to extend but to *diminish* the range of thought, and this purpose was indirectly assisted by cutting the choice of words down to a minimum.”<sup>3</sup>

This is frightening enough as a work of fiction, but to understand how close it has become to our reality is terrifying. And it is this fear of speaking that I want to turn our attention toward. To my knowledge there is no word for the fear of speaking that’s become widespread in our modern democracies. *Glossophobia* refers merely to the fear of public speaking, which is akin to stage fright. I’m talking about the more insidious and growing fear of being punished or ostracized for unintentionally saying something others find offensive or “harmful.” At best, offenders are called out and required to ritualistically confess the error and ask forgiveness. At worst, the unwitting offender experiences public humiliation, demonization, ostracization, and eventually have their character and career destroyed.

Since there is no word for the kind of fear prompted by this sort of dread, I have made up my own, *Omiliaphobia*, from the Greek words for “speaking” and “fear.” Unlike the fear of giving a speech, omiliaphobia<sup>4</sup> is the chronic fear of saying anything at all. I propose the more authoritarian a society is, the more *omiliaphobic* it becomes. Sometimes this fear of speaking is caused by authorities that use their power to directly control, intimidate, and punish those who say anything they disagree with. We saw an almost unbelievable example of this in Tennessee just a couple of days ago when a Republican majority expelled two Democratic lawmakers from its State Legislature. The ousted lawmakers had participated in public protest calling upon the entire legislature to deal with gun violence. They did so, they say, after being repeatedly silenced by the majority, including having their microphones cut off, while trying to discuss it during formal legislative sessions. This is a rare example of authoritarianism, at least in the U.S., and I hope the decision is overturned and such dictatorial behavior doesn’t become another new normal, like the gun deaths these lawmakers were attempting to draw attention to have.

But, again, it is more usual, even in the most authoritarian of countries, for the citizens themselves to do most of the policing of themselves and others. This comes by using social forces, like positive and negative reinforcement, to develop strong patriotic feelings for one’s country, including its

government and top authority, like Vladimir Putin in Russia, Xi Jinping in China, and Kim Jong-un in North Korea. In such societies, the police, military, and secret service may sometimes be used to arrest and assassinate their rare dissenters and critics, but, for the most part, they rely upon their indoctrinated citizens to censure themselves and their neighbors.

The kind of draconian maneuvers like we saw in Tennessee this week, and in Texas where an anti-abortion activist and Federal Judge went against all precedent when banning an FDA approved abortion medicine, are rare in democracies. Self-censuring, however, is common even in the freest of countries. This is so because individual citizens are more loyal to their party or their identity group than they are to anything their party or group stands for. They care more about their side winning or staying on top than they do about the liberal values free societies are founded and thrive upon. To hell with democracy, ethics, integrity. To hell with freedom, reason, and tolerance. To hell with inherent worth and dignity.

The degradation of liberal values in democracies isn't due to an authoritarian "Big Brother," as George Orwell imagined, but to their disregard by a majority of ordinary citizens more akin to Ray Bradbury's dystopian novel, *Fahrenheit 451*. In his story, firemen are not used to put out fires but to start them in order to burn books. But book-burning and, ultimately, the banning of free speech, "didn't come from the Government down," Bradbury writes. "There was no dictum, no declaration, no censorship, to start with, no! Technology, mass exploitation, and minority pressure carried the trick."<sup>5</sup> Considering *F. 451* was written in 1954, Bradbury's novel was incredibly foretelling of what has become true for us today.

In his story, society began to fracture due to the emergence of too many special interest groups that made it impossible for anyone to say anything meaningful without offending somebody. "Don't step on the toes of dog-lovers, cat-lovers, doctors, lawyers, merchants, chiefs, Mormons, Baptists, Unitarians, second-generation Chinese, Swedes, Italians, Germans, Texans, Brooklynites, Irishmen, people from Oregon or Mexico,"<sup>6</sup> Bradbury writes. (Given what's happening to our liberal religion today, it's remarkable that he included Unitarians in his list of intolerant special interest groups.) It was this fear of saying something offensive to others—omiliaphobia—that led to the destruction of free speech in *F. 451*. "The bigger your market," Bradbury writes, "the less you handle controversy, remember that! All the minor minor minorities with their navels to be kept clean. Authors, full of evil thoughts, lock up your typewriters."<sup>7</sup> The only publications to survive the purge were those that said nothing meaningful, comics and pornography. In the end, he says, "firemen," the official book burners were "rarely necessary. The public itself stopped reading of its own accord."<sup>8</sup>

The point here is that a society can become no less authoritarian, perhaps even more so, when it's instigated by the masses as by a government or dictator. In addition to the splintering of society into what we now call identity groups, Bradbury says technology, mass exploitation, and minority pressure are responsible. Today, social media often takes the place of the courts when it comes to trying, convicting, and punishing those deemed to have offended a particular identity group. Likewise, the mass exploitation he predicted isn't conducted by state-controlled media, but by less

than a dozen corporations that use the once free press to promote their own political agendas by demonizing their ideological opponents and using propaganda, not news, to influence the masses and turn them against each other. And, by “minority pressure,” Bradbury wasn’t referring, as we do today, to racial minorities, but to any identity group, be it based on race, nationality, politics, religion, gun rights, or something else. When associating more closely with our identity groups than the liberal values that can unite us, we end up following the most extreme fringe in order to stay united, as has happened with the Republican Party. Or we fracture into numerous tribes that refuse to play if our team doesn’t get its way, making it impossible for us to gain or sustain the collective political power necessary to make any positive changes.

All of this is exacerbated by the omiliaphobia that has become an epidemic in the world, especially in North America. These social forces—technology, mass media, and tribalism—have made us afraid to genuinely talk to each other. Talk about gun control and get your microphone turned off. Protest gun violence and get expelled from your democratically elected position. Write a book or article that some group dislikes and get condemned on social media and fired from your job.

Last year, while attending the Heterodox Academy’s Conference in Denver, I heard a brilliant professor of medieval history give a captivating lecture comparing the Catholic Inquisitions to today’s, so-called, Cancel Culture. Her presentation was so polished that I assumed she’d given it many times before. So I asked, “Is this something you’ve shared with your students?” She responded with a short “hah,” as if I was kidding, and so did every other academic in the room. That’s an example of omiliaphobia—college professors afraid to discuss certain matters with their students, including a history professor who has a cogent example of how history directly ties into what’s happening today.

I recently heard a couple of examples that illustrate the sort of experiences that lead to omiliaphobia—this fear of speaking. In one case, a woman was in a staff lunchroom when others began complimenting her on her new shoes, a seemingly common and innocuous conversation. Then a fellow interrupted to say that talking about new shoes was a “trigger” for him because he was made fun of as a child for having big feet. After others coddled him for a bit, the conversation shut down, as should be expected in a space where participants can’t even talk about their shoes without hurting somebody’s feelings.

Another instance involved a fellow who was summoned to his boss’s office and told he would have to take Racial Sensitivity training because another employee complained he’d said something racist. The employee overheard the man, who is not racist, say to another employee that he felt the neighborhood was going “downhill” because of rising crime and litter. He wasn’t given the name of the complainant or an opportunity to explain his side of the matter. Yet keeping his job was conditioned upon his successful completion of the sensitivity training.

And just last month an article in *The Guardian* reported the books written by the beloved children’s author, Roald Dahl, including titles like *James and the Giant Peach*, *Charlie and the*

*Chocolate Factory*, and *The Witches* are being redacted by their current publisher to remove “harmful” language. Instead of “fat,” Augustus Gloop is now called “enormous,” because that’s so much better. Mrs. Twit is no longer “ugly and beastly,” just beastly.

The problem is the purification of language never stops. Not long after a word is replaced with something considered more suitable, it too becomes taboo. Some of you may have seen the *Elimination of Harmful Language Initiative* recently published by Stanford University’s IT department. In addition to replacing terms like “blind study” with “masked study,” “walk-in” with “drop in,” “tribe” with “friends,” “white paper” with “position paper,” “you guys” with “folks,” and “prostitute” with “person who engages in sex work,” the list now considers the word “trigger” itself to be a trigger, explaining that “The phrase can cause stress about what’s to follow.” Instead, we should now use the term “content note.” But what’s to prevent this term from also making someone anxious about what’s to follow? And what if “masked study” reminds someone of having been robbed by a masked bandit? And why does “engaging in sex work” sound any better than “prostitution?”

You might be interested to know that University of Washington’s IT department recently published a similar list of taboo terms. Male and female connectors must now be called “pin and receptacle,” “brown bag” must be called “lunch and learn,” and the “peanut gallery” must be called the “upper balcony” or “cheap seats.” But what about people with peanut allergies or those who are too poor to afford better seats? More importantly, this linguicidal obsession isn’t changing the world one iota at a time, let alone one word at a time. And I shudder to think Internet Technicians have become our modern Ministry of Truth, dedicated to “cutting our choice of words down to a minimum.”

When examples like these arise, people around my age or older are shocked, even if a little amused. But imagine growing up in a linguicidal culture in which there is almost always somebody eager to pounce on any little thing you say that can be misconstrued as offensive. Can there be any wonder that anxiety rates are on the rise among young people? Beginning in 2013, when cancel culture began on college campuses, students with anxiety increased to a historic high of 45% and was over 50% by 2016.<sup>9</sup> This is the generation that was first conditioned to be afraid of speaking because saying anything might get one publicly shamed and ostracized. As Lukianoff and Haidt say in their book, *Coddling of the American Mind*, “Reports from around the country are remarkably similar: students at many colleges today are walking on eggshells, afraid of saying the wrong thing, liking the wrong post, or coming to the defense of someone whom they know to be innocent, out of fear that they themselves will be called out by a mob on social media.”<sup>10</sup> That’s omiliaphobia.

Today, even as we watch in despair as rightwing conservatives are dismantling democratic institutions before our very eyes, extremists on the left are undermining the very values that define what a democracy is supposed to be about. They think they are making the world more just, but they are just making the rest of us more anxious in a world that already has enough to legitimately worry about.

But there is a solution to all of these problems, the only solution that has ever worked, the recognition that every person has inherent worth and dignity, no matter what language they speak or which words they use. And this is why our liberal religion and liberalism itself must not only survive but be reinvigorated to levels not seen since the Enlightenment. Freedom, reason, tolerance, these are the only principles that can unite humanity and unite the world. This is the purpose of NAUA, the North American Unitarian Association, to enable our liberal religion to emerge from the shadows of ridicule and uselessness to become a vital force for good in the world. It is why, in the near future, we will be joined by individuals and congregations who have been longing for a truly liberal association they can be proud to part of, and it is why others, who have never heard of Unitarianism before will rush to join us, because we have reconnected with our historic roots and our transformative values. And together, we will inspire humanity itself to rise to the heights of its fullest potential, ushering in an age of peace and justice and progress unlike anything the world has ever seen.

<sup>1</sup> Harari, Yuval Noah, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, Harper Collins Publishers, New York, NY, 2015, (Kindle version), loc. 2562.

<sup>2</sup> Orwell, George, *1984*, Signet Classics, Harcourt Inc., Penguin Group (USA), 1949, p. 51.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 300.

<sup>4</sup> Some have used these words separately, omilia phobia, to describe the fear of hearing others speak, which is also a piece of what I mean by joining them together. Omiliaphobia is a general obsession with speech, whether one's own, or someone else's.

<sup>5</sup> Bradbury, Ray, *Fahrenheit 451*, Simon and Schuster Paperbacks, New York, NY, 1951, 2013, p. 55.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 83

<sup>9</sup> Lukianoff, Greg, and Haidt, Jonathan, *The Coddling of the American Mind*, Penguin Press, New York, NY, 2018, p. 157.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72.