



BIROn - Birkbeck Institutional Research Online

Sheldon, Ruth (2016) Secularism, free speech and the public university: student engagement with Israel-Palestine in a British campus. In: Aune, K. and Stevenson, J. (eds.) Religion and higher education in Europe and North America. Research into Higher Education. Abingdon, UK: Routledge. ISBN 9781138652941.

Downloaded from: <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/id/eprint/16397/>

Usage Guidelines:

Please refer to usage guidelines at <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/policies.html>
contact lib-eprints@bbk.ac.uk.

or alternatively

Secularism, Free Speech and the Public University: Student Engagement with Israel-Palestine in a British Campus¹

Ruth Sheldon

Department of Psychosocial Studies

Birkbeck, University of London

R.Sheldon@bbk.ac.uk

In late 2010, controversy erupted at Old University¹ when the student Palestine Society organised a public talk by a Palestinian journalist that culminated in violent exchanges between participating students. The national and international media reported that the invited speaker had contravened the Students' Union's antisemitism policy and provoked verbal and physical aggression between members of the audience. In the immediate aftermath, the police were contacted regarding claims by Jewish students that they felt scared for their safety and the university authorities investigated these allegations. In the weeks that followed, media commentators denounced the speaker for 'glorifying' violence against the Israeli state 'in the name of Allah' and elite public figures including Members of Parliament and Jewish communal leaders accused the university authorities of allowing 'extremism' into the campus.

The following term, in a context of heightened tensions between the Palestine Society and the Jewish Society, the university hosted a public debate about the academic boycott of Israel. The contrast between the reception of this debate and the prior event could not have been more marked. In the immediate aftermath of this debate, the student newspaper published an article proclaiming its success. Although the event had not 'resolved' the substantive issue, the article claimed that it had reaffirmed this institution's position as an authentically *academic* community:

The Professor chairing the evening began with an appeal to reason from the two sides.

He asked the audience to sustain a spirit of 'mutual respect, tolerance and calm'... 'This is an academic institution and this will be an academic debate', he [the chair] said.

Afterwards, the event organisers said that they were pleased by the meeting's civil discourse.

¹ This is the accepted, pre-copy edited version of the following chapter: Sheldon, R. (forthcoming 2016) Secularism, free speech and the public university: student engagement with Israel-Palestine within a British campus, in Aune, K and Stevenson, J (eds.) *Religion and Belief in Higher Education*. London: Routledge.

Carefully stage managed by the institutional authorities, this debate was presented as an exemplary model of academic engagement with highly contentious questions of justice in relation to the Israel-Palestine conflict. It was also venerated in a broader sense, as a demonstration of the university instantiating Enlightenment values of free speech and civility within the public sphere.

In this chapter, I will develop the claim that this debate can helpfully be understood as a performance of secularism within the university. Of course, this may seem like a roundabout approach, as compared, for example, to studying the burgeoning activities of self-consciously 'secular' student societies. What, then, is the value of framing the terms of this academic boycott debate event in relation to secularism rather than – for example – as 'liberal', 'rationalist' or even just 'modern'? Certainly, the broader political and ethical questions raised by this activism expose the contemporary British university as a profoundly conflicted institution grappling with multiple histories and relations of power.² Furthermore, the raging tensions that arise in the transnational student politics of Palestine-Israel cannot be reduced to an opposition between self-identifying religious and secular groups and any attempt to explain these often visceral dynamics must attend holistically to the complex multidimensional stakes of this issue for students and institutions (Sheldon forthcoming). Yet with this caveat, the remit of this chapter is more modest; I will focus specifically on one aspect of student activism around Palestine-Israel as a locus of wider tensions between the protection of 'free speech' and prevention of 'extremism' on campus. My aims are first, to connect this case with a body of scholarship that explores formations of freedom, speech, truth and subjectivity within what Talal Asad (2003) names as a dominant 'Christian secular' culture; second, to show how naming 'secularism' as one mode of power operating in relation to Palestine-Israel activism can deepen our understanding of unnamed tensions experienced by some politically active Muslim and Jewish students who may not name themselves 'religious'; and, third, to learn from the everyday practices of these students in order to think imaginatively about what constitutes 'free speech' within the contemporary university.

What is the 'secular campus'?

What do I mean when I speak of the 'secular campus' in the context of UK higher education? What is opened up by asking about the secular *campus* as opposed to secular disciplines, secular knowledge, or the secular academy? The latter terms engage with the emergence of academic disciplines that explicitly oppose their truth procedures and sources of epistemic authority to those framed as 'theological'. In contrast, the notion of the secular *campus* has tended to refer

the self-proclaimed neutrality of higher education communities with regard to the religious identities of their members, so that these public institutions instantiate the doctrinal separation of church and state (Dinham and Jones 2012). In this chapter, my own use of this term is intended to connect with an emerging body of scholarship concerned with lived experiences of secularism. This work seeks to bridge the gap between more abstract genealogical analyses of secularism as an intellectual discourse and framings of secularism as affective, sensuous and relational practices, which can be studied ethnographically (Strhan 2012; Hirschkind 2011; Mahmood 2009; Motamedi-Fraser unpublished).

In one key contribution, Charles Hirschkind (2011) has asked 'Is there a secular body?' Are there, in other words, particular non-cognitive embodied practices, sensibilities or modes of expression that we can name as 'secular'? In posing this question, Hirschkind helpfully highlights a tension, which I take up in this chapter; that the secular is somehow best approached indirectly and yet this makes it a somehow slippery phenomenon to approach. Thus his answer to the question challenges the reductionism of discursive approaches but notes the limitations of attempts to define secularism in terms of a determinant set of embodied dispositions. More specifically, Hirschkind emphasises that the contemporary meanings of the secular do seem to be connected with the articulation of a progressive *narrative* of the overcoming of religious error by secular reason, which differentiates the concept from the terms "liberal", "modern" or "rational" (p.641). Secularism in other words 'marks a relational dynamic more than an identity', it is a mode of power, a negative gesture in relation to religion (p.644). Yet, this relation is not only discursive but also material and emotive: 'a constellation of institutions, ideas, and affective orientations that constitute an important dimension of what we call modernity and its defining forms of knowledge and practice' (p. 633). Building on this work, Anna Strhan (2012) has made a convincing case for methods that restrain from operationalising abstract definitions in order to attend to the narratives, ideas, material practices, objects and emotions, which gather into formations of secularism in specific contexts.³

In this chapter, I draw on these approaches as I develop a case study of secularism on campus by focusing on the dominant norms that governed an institutionally authorised public debate about the academic boycott of Israel. Learning from Saba Mahmood's (2009) discussion of free speech as a secular semiotic ideology, I explore how notions of freedom, speech and subjectivity, defined in distinction from a religious other, were realised in practice at this campus event. This means that rather than approaching the secular academy as a set of abstract disciplinary discourses, my starting point is an ethnographic study of embodied encounters relating to Israel-Palestine within university campuses.⁴ By drawing on this ethnographic material, I claim that we can connect more abstract debates regarding the epistemology of

academic disciplines with an analysis of secularism as a far-reaching relation of power affecting the democratic life of our institutions.

Framing rational speech against Islamic extremism

After completing the advance registration, I arrived at Old University on the evening of the public debate about the academic boycott of Israel and took a seat. The large lecture theatre quickly filled up with people wearing hijabs, keffiyehs and kippahs, sartorial signs of polarised affiliations, which contributed to a tense and expectant atmosphere. The NUS Vice President responsible for student welfare entered the room and behind him a middle aged uniformed security guard stood expressionless, hands folded, by the door. In the left hand aisle, a student was setting up a camera in order to film the stage, supplementing the university's official audio recording of the event. The spectators hushed as the two white male academics speaking for and against the boycott (herein 'Dr Pro' and 'Professor Anti') took their seats in front of the audience. The adjudicator of the debate, Professor Chair, a specialist in a seemingly unrelated aspect of European politics who had been requested by the university management, was seated behind a separate table. In a plummy English accent, Professor Chair's opening remarks drew attention to the dynamic of mutual surveillance afforded by this venue,

I'm delighted to see so many of you here. It is a deceptively large theatre and quite intimate so we can see you just as easily as you can see us.

He continued by firmly circumscribing the anticipated impulses of the speakers and audience; each speaker to be given an 'assiduously' timed fifteen minutes to make their case followed by 'a short five minute rebuttal of each other's position', at which point short audience questions and contributions would be solicited.

In stark contrast to the controversial Palestine Society meeting of the previous term, the university authorities had been actively involved in the careful staging of this debate. The stringent entry requirements, official recording, security, and 'neutral' chairing of the meeting all conformed to national policy guidelines regarding the organisation of speaker events on potentially controversial subjects. A few months later, the renewed 'Preventing Violent Extremism' policy explicitly focused on the need for such procedures as part of the struggle to defend British HEIs against the perceived threat posed by 'extremist' speakers. In response, both Universities UK (2011) and NUS (2011) produced guidance on freedom of speech, the monitoring of religious societies and the introduction of checks on external speakers, which

included case studies of tensions arising between Jewish societies and Palestine societies on campus.

The decision on the part of the Old University to explicitly adopt these guidelines for the boycott debate was perhaps unsurprising. In the preceding years, campus conflicts around free speech in relation to Israel-Palestine had featured in the public media, as policymakers, community leaders and interfaith organisations framed this as a key tension for university authorities (see for example, Guardian 2010). More specifically, this issue had come to be connected with discourses about religious extremism as part of a wider shift towards representing Israel-Palestine as a 'Jewish-Muslim' conflict *and* as a consequence of broader political changes to higher education institutions in Britain.⁵ Furthermore, within Old University, the recent accusation of extremist speech at the Palestine Society meeting was just the latest controversy for an institution whose global reputation was under attack from organisations promoting this counter-extremism agenda.

A key claim of this chapter is that these political narratives constructed 'free speech' on campus in opposition to 'religious' forms of knowledge, communication and moral subjectivity. For example, the Government's 2011 *Prevent Strategy*, explicitly depicted HEIs as under threat from 'violent' and 'radical' forms of Islam. These were depicted as persuasive ideologies which influenced 'vulnerable' students through emotional processes of 'group bonding, pressure and indoctrination' to endorse violent responses to perceived injustice (Home Office 2011: 17). As such, this policy of *safeguarding* the campus posited a threat to the truthful, emotionally restrained and autonomous 'free speech' instantiated in the Western university. It demanded the exclusion of fallacious, excessively passionate and dependent / corrupted forms of speech and subjectivity associated with 'fundamentalist' religion and, specifically, Islam (Asad 2003; Hirschkind 2011). And while different elite stakeholders within the higher education sector diverged over *how* to protect the values of the university, they converged in framing HEIs as the site in which secular freedom (in contrast to religious dogma) should be realised. Thus Universities UK began its own 2011 report *Freedom of Speech on Campus: Rights and Responsibilities* by stating:

Universities play an important role in society as places of debate and discussion where ideas can be tested without fear of control, where students learn to challenge ideas and think for themselves, and where rationality underpins the pursuit of knowledge' (p.1).

In this way, as Old University instituted these guidelines at this debate, it shaped the moral campus through the exclusion of the excessive emotional, dependent forms of speech and subjectivity that it associated with theistic religion.

Regulating civil speech: Jewish identity and Zionist belief

In a paternalistic tone, Professor Chair introduced the ground rules of the meeting and of academic debate more broadly by authoritatively insisting that members of the audience display mutual respect:

A shared will to debate rests of course on a common commitment to mutual respect as we discuss and argue... As chair I will rule out of order heckling or shouting. We are here in an academic institution to engage in serious debate, we will want to listen to the views being put. Otherwise there's no point in having the debate. So mutual respect means toleration, listening and I repeat no heckling or shouting... So if we respect each other's opinions I look forward to a very worthwhile debate.

As the debate unfolded, the protagonists dramatically evidenced their conformity to these norms with exaggerated sporting gestures, prefixing their aggressive exchanges with the civil language of 'learned friend' and 'colleague'.

In the previous section, I claimed that the discipline of dispassionate 'free speech' emerging at this debate was formed out of a negative relation to 'religious extremism'. However, there was also another narrative at stake in Professor Chair's appeal to tolerance and respect, which contributed to the formation of secularism that emerged at this meeting. The speaker at the Palestine Society meeting of the previous term was not only accused of extremism for making claims 'in the name of Allah'. Rather, members of the Jewish society had accused him of transgressing the boundary between anti-Zionist and antisemitic speech. This occurred against a context of intense, high profile disputes about the relationship between anti-Zionism and antisemitism in Israel-Palestine activism, which focused on claims and counter-claims regarding 'the new antisemitism'.⁶ As a consequence those hosting this debate were all too aware of the need to police the boundary between 'legitimate' and 'antisemitic' speech about Israel.

As Kahn-Harris and Gidley (2010) have helpfully explored, this framing of the Israel-Palestine conflict in terms of Jewish experiences of antisemitism forms part of a wider Anglo-Jewish discourse which highlights the insecurity of Jews as an ethnic minority in Britain. Thus, within the public spaces of the campus, Jewish students have learned to express support for Israel with reference to the threats posed to Jews as a racialized group, to affirm the distinction between 'legitimate' and 'antisemitic' critiques of Israel, and to avoid spiritual or theological expressions of attachments to Zionism. This has aligned Anglo-Jewish grammars for speaking about Israel with a liberal notion of balancing the right to free speech with the right to

prevention from harm (Universities UK 2011: 44). According to this juridical logic, it is legitimate to critique the chosen opinions of Zionists but this speech must be limited if it harms 'racial' subjects whose identity is un-chosen.⁷

By framing free speech within the terms of respect for different *opinions*, Professor Chair contributed to a framing of Zionism – in contrast to Judaism - as propositional beliefs about the legitimacy of the Israeli state to which individuals would autonomously assent or dissent. Furthermore, his demand for tolerance drew on an opposition between free and harmful speech which took Judaism to be an unchosen ethnic identity in need of protection, and Zionism to be a set of beliefs requiring critical distance on the part of its adherents. My suggestion, following Gil Anidjar (2007), is that this is one example of a process through which Jews have been labelled according to discrete categories of 'religion', 'ethnicity; and 'race' which are the secularised products of Western Christendom. As Talal Asad (2003) and Saba Mahmood (2009) have also highlighted, this secular taxonomy assumes an implicitly Protestant understanding of the epistemic and moral subject in ways that disavow more complex, ambiguous and perhaps troubling formations of identity. In this way, as Old University sought to model a form of free speech that excluded extremism and antisemitism, so it implicitly constructed Islam and Judaism within its own terms.

Performing free speech

Professor Chair concluded his introductory comments on a humorous note that ironised the dramatic format of the debate, 'Surely I'm not expected to come round you like some kind of morning TV discussion programme'. Now, leaning forward, shoulders hunched, Dr Pro read out the logical steps of his carefully crafted argument, 'I'll say what the academic boycott is, why it addresses the right target, why it has a strong rationale, is efficient, high impact and potentially effective'. Anticipating his opponent's response, he raised his voice forcefully as he stated:

The academic boycott... is not the preserve of anti-Semites and hypocrites, but it's timely, progressive, it's exciting, it's based on shared values, aiming at the right target with a strong rationale...

Then carefully prefixing his passion with a legalistic turn of phrase, he concluded:

Indeed *let me submit* that where so many social movements in the contemporary world are based on religious, market, ethnic or nationalist fundamentalism of one kind or another, then a movement based on freedom and democracy speaking in the name of

law and right, that opens up exciting perspectives of transnational solidarity in dark times might be one that commands our attention and even our support.

By emphatically validating universalism, scientific knowledge, academic freedom and institutional autonomy in opposition to 'fundamentalisms', Dr Pro set the stage for ensuing dynamics as each speaker struggled to embody these values and to portray their opponents in the opposite terms.

Professor Anti had been silent during this speech, looking fixedly away from his opponent, visibly containing his anger with his hand cupping his chin and covering his mouth. Now, he looked up and began to speak, loudly and clearly, categorically expressing his opposition to Dr Pro by *also* appealing to the value of scientific knowledge:

I personally know that a cessation of links and grants with Israel would first of all have an immediate and direct effect... we're talking about direct disadvantage in a whole range of - not only - biomedical conditions.

Asking why Israelis institutions are 'singled out' as 'uniquely complicit' with their government, Professor Anti implicitly invoked the charge of antisemitism as he claimed the boycotters transgressed the logical and moral 'universality principle which is crucial to academic freedom'.

Just like the onstage protagonists, individuals in the audience now embodied abstract, predetermined political positions 'for' or 'against' the motion. Microphones picked up the sound of pages rustling as the contributors read out prepared statements. Shortly afterwards, the drama reached its apex as Professor Chair announced the final vote. Qualifying the process with 'you are not a scientific sample', he asked the audience to raise their hands either in support or opposition to the motion. I sat, fixed in my seat, struck by the rigid binary choice this presented. The 'neutral' framing of the debate had itself crystallised the polarisation of the audience; any expression of a third position, of uncertainty or ambivalence, was foreclosed by the fixed structure of format. The result was quickly announced as a victory for the opponents of boycott, an outcome which the president of the Palestine Society, Sadiq, later insisted had been apparent from the makeup of the room at the outset of the event.

From the moment that Professor Chair authoritatively expressed the contractual ground-rules for the meeting, this debate circumscribed the form as well as the content of this political process. With exaggerated gestures, Dr Pro and Professor Anti engaged in a hyperbolic performance of a restrained, detached mode of speech. The main actors and audience members continued in this vein by offering statements of 'facts' about the justice of the motion, appealing to a logical grammar of consistency, universality and principled deductions whilst carefully

avoiding any display of subjective investments, or impulsive emotion. Meanwhile Professor Chair's injection of ironic humour demanded that the audience demonstrate that they did not care *too much*, that the motion before us was not a matter of identity but rather required the adoption of critical distance.

In these ways, this debate enabled Old University to perform a juridical vision of free speech within the terms of secularist narratives. This was not only revealed in Dr Pro's explicit rejection of 'religious fundamentalisms' or in the speakers' allusions to antisemitism. Rather, it was indexed in Old University's dramatic conformity to a set of authorised distinctions which defined what it is to be a freely speaking subject. Shaped by an Enlightenment inheritance, this notion of freedom was predicated upon an assumed distantiating between subjects and the objects of their claims, a freedom shaped through the critical practice of objective actors, able to stand outside their emotional investments in this conflict and to autonomously *choose* whether to assent to propositions about boycotting Israel (Brown 2009; Mahmood 2009). As I will go on to discuss, set against this wider context, this vision of free speech put Muslim and Jewish students under particular pressures to conform to its terms, and it is in this sense that I claim a secular mode of power was at work.

Silencing students' voices

Writing in the student newspaper shortly after the debate, Sadiq, justified the Palestine Society's decision to participate in this event, stating:

We are willing to work with groups who we disagree with [in order]...to expose these disagreements and discuss them in a constructive way.

Talking with me a few weeks later, Sadiq described the internal politics of this decision in terms that resonated with the discourse of 'extremism':

So you will get groups who are, like, not more puritanical, but in their ideological beliefs they apply that very strictly in terms of practice, so, like, we can't debate Israelis because it legitimises them... then you get people like me who are more pragmatic.

As another activist Yusra explained, members of the Palestine Society carefully negotiated this dominant secularist narrative, as they sought to appeal to a broader student audience within the university:

I would say that the stereotype that Palestinian activists have is something that we're always trying to overcome. Erm so you know being leftist fanatical or whatever, radicals, terrorists, Hamas supporting, you know we've been called a lot of things. I would say that we're trying to always come across and present ourselves in a way that is acceptable.

In this way, members of the Palestine Society at times worked *within* what they perceived to be the widely shared distinction between legitimate and extremist actors. The Palestine Society's legitimacy, their ability to 'present ourselves as acceptable' to this audience, depended on conformity to an authorised model of free speech in the university that included disciplining their emotions so as to adopt a style of restrained detachment.

Later Sadiq explained to me that this debate had initially been intended to address internal divisions over the boycott *within* the Palestine Society and described how he personally felt conflicted about the question of academic boycott. Yet once the format was changed to an agonistic public debate with members of the Jewish Society, Sadiq raised his hand in support of the boycott, conforming to the logical 'pro-Palestinian' position demanded of him. His confession revealed how the vision of the 'free' subject, as one who makes a categorical decision about right or wrong, repressed the expression of difference, complexity and inner tensions not only amongst groups but within the self. Talking with Saniyah, a British Muslim student whose parents were Palestinian, she emphasised that her activism for Palestine was grounded not in the particularities of Islam or her family history but rather in the universal principles of human rights. She described how she had learnt over time not to get angry or over-emotional because 'that's the reaction *they* want'; instead she learned to discipline her emotions in order to speak in a logical language. Significantly, while she affirmed the rationalist practice of free speech assumed in the academic debate, an alternative model of speech - as dialogue - was too dangerous to countenance:

That's why I think dialogue is very negative in some senses because you're just gonna get angry and it's not gonna be productive and then when you get angry it becomes emotional and when it's emotional, it's *not logical*, so you, you need to try and maintain your thoughts and everything and not get very personal about it.

In these ways, as Muslim students negotiated the secular norms of 'free speech' so they learned to express themselves within a reductive binary grammar that silenced more complex responses to this conflict.

When I met with Justin and Ella, the Jewish Society members involved in organising the debate, they also initially represented themselves in accordance with the secular matrix of free speech. Describing the wider dynamics of this activism, Justin contrasted the ‘disgusting’, ‘offensive’ Palestine Society ‘stunts’ with the Jewish Society who ‘do all our events to the book’. However, when in the course of our conversation I asked how Israel had come to be important to them, a different picture emerged. Justin spoke of his frustration at the demand placed on Jewish students to maintain a rigid separation between ‘Jewish’ and ‘Zionist’ activities on campus. He talked about growing up in an Orthodox community which framed a messianic relationship to Israel ‘and part of me still finds that very hard to let go of’. When I clumsily asked Ella why it seemed so hard for Jewish students to articulate the role of ‘religion or faith’ in their activism, she responded by questioning the very framing of Zionism in terms of the religious / secular distinction:

I think it’s just really complicated. It’s issues that people are uncomfortable with dealing with and feel maybe not educated enough to deal with them and people are scared... You know it’s like ‘the actions of a Zionist entity government’ rather than like ‘a connection of a people to a spiritual homeland for many, many years’. It’s a different terminology, a different way of understanding it, which makes it easier to, to, I don’t know, talk about it I suppose.

Justin added that he felt torn by his own need to participate in the secular distinction between Judaism and Zionism. For on the one hand he was struggling to make space for ‘depoliticised’ Judaism on campus yet this was undermined by his sense that Zionism was inseparable from the ‘yearning for Israel’ expressed in the Torah. In this way, the very demand that Jewish students engage in detached critical judgements about the legitimacy of Israel prohibited these more complex connections from being expressed. As such for Muslim and Jewish students alike, the model of free speech demanded at the academic boycott debate paradoxically closed down the voicing or exploration of key aspects of this conflict.

Challenging the terms of secularism on campus: what is it to speak freely?

In the course of this chapter, I have named the model of free speech upheld by one university as mediating a secular mode of power on campus. I have developed the claim that secularism can work as a hegemonic framework within our academic institutions which, as Mahmood writes “not only caricatures the religious Other but... remains blind to its own disciplines of subjectivity, affective attachments and subject-object relations (p.90) To conclude, I wish to draw out two ethical implications for researchers as we contribute to specific formations of

secularism within our fieldsites, disciplines and institutions (Strhan 2012). First, although it is beyond the scope of this chapter to explore this in-depth, I hope that these vignettes might provide open up reflexive conversations about the pressures that give rise to hegemonic secular frameworks within universities.⁸ Second, I wish to frame a response to the dominant secular vision of 'free speech' within our institutions by learning from the creative practices of Muslim and Jewish students.

In 2013, I met up with Sadiq again and learned that as he had graduated from his pressurised role with the Palestine Society so he seemed more able to speak out of Islamic traditions with which he identified. Many months after the boycott debate, Sadiq had participated in a seminar about hate speech on campus organised by an interfaith organisation. In that context, Sadiq had sought to articulate an Islamic conception of the ethics of speech, which subtly diverged from the juridical model outlined by a representative of the student Atheist Society. He had described the ways in which Islamic traditions recognise the power of speech to unintentionally hurt and undermine people who are already situated *within* unequal social and interpersonal contexts. He talked about our responsibility to somehow recognise each other as equal participants within public life in order to enable each other to fully participate and express ourselves. In this way, Sadiq introduced an ethics of speech which challenged the assumption that speech is primarily propositional and that freedom is a property of individual agents who can be imagined in abstraction from their personal and social relationships. Rather he gestured towards a different understanding of free speech, as somehow dependent on the quality of the relationships between those involved.

Reflecting on Sadiq's thoughtful intervention, I was struck by a resonance with the work of a student-led Israel-Palestine dialogue group based at a different institution. Here, students had also cultivated alternative ways of speaking, which contrasted with the ideal of free speech as depersonalised, dispassionate debate. There students had developed conversations over time, in which they came to reflect on their own investments in ossified narratives about Israel-Palestine. Through sharing their personal histories, and learning to trust each other as caring, rather than detached, interlocutors, it became possible to move beyond well-worn inherited scripts, to speak, as it were, in their own voices. The Jewish student who facilitated this nominally secular forum told me how his approach drew on his education within a Zionist youth movement. This helped him to shape processes of voicing, questioning and interpreting political narratives that were connected with Jewish hermeneutic, textual and ritual practices. These are traditions, which challenge those analogous dualisms – including between the public and personal, the rational and emotional, and the form and content of language - which frame the secular grammar of 'free speech' on campus (Boyarin 1996; Seidler 2007).

In this chapter, I have sought to name a hegemonic model of free speech as secular in order to trace how it can silence students, and so subvert the very values it formally espouses. But I have also gestured towards a more creative role for researchers engaged with the study of religion and secularism on campus. Within a higher education landscape undergoing significant changes, the question of 'free speech' is inseparable from that of the value of the university. By attending to the ethical practices of students shaped by marginalised traditions, I suggest that an alternative vision of the university might emerge. And what might this look like? Not merely a juridical space concerned with protecting the rights of autonomous agents to demonstrate their knowledge - but rather a pedagogic community in which we come to know ourselves and speak in our own voices from within the context of ethical relationships.

References

- Anidjar, G. (2007) *Semites: Race, Religion, Literature*. Stanford CA: Stanford University Press
- Asad, T. (2003) *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, Stanford CA: Stanford University Press
- Asad, T. (2009) 'Free speech, blasphemy, and secular criticism' in Asad, T., Brown, W., Butler, J., and Mahmood, S. (eds.) *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech*, Berkeley: The Townsend Centre for the Humanities: 20-63
- Back, L. (2004) 'Ivory Towers? The Academy and Racism' in I. Law, D. Phillips and L. Turney, (eds.) *Institutional Racism in Higher Education*. Stoke on Trent: Trentham: 1-6
- Boyarin, J. (1996) *Thinking in Jewish*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press
- Brown, W. (2009) 'Introduction' in Asad, T., Brown, W., Butler, J., and Mahmood, S. (eds.) *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech*, Berkeley: The Townsend Centre for the Humanities.7-19
- Dinham, A. and Jones, S. H. (2012) 'Religion, Public Policy, and the Academy: Brokering Public Faith in a Context of Ambivalence?' *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 27(2):185-201
- Hirschkind, C. (2011) 'Is there a Secular Body?' *Cultural Anthropology: Journal of the Society for Cultural Anthropology*, 26(4): 633-647
- Home Office (2011) *Prevent Strategy: Presented to Parliament by the Secretary of State for the Home Department by Command of Her Majesty, June 2011*. Norwich: The Stationary Office
- Kahn-Harris, K. and Gidley, B. (2010) *Turbulent Times: The British Jewish Community Today*. London: Continuum
- Kaposi, D. (2014) *Violence and Understanding in Gaza: the British Broadsheets' Coverage of the War*. London: Palgrave Macmillan

Mahmood, S. (2009) 'Religious Reason and Secular Affect: An Incommensurable Divide?' in Asad, T., Brown, W., Butler, J., and Mahmood, S., (eds.) *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech*, Berkeley: The Townsend Centre for the Humanities: 64-100

Motamedi-Fraser, M. (unpublished) 'But God is neither like politics nor birds': Islam, secularity and practice in English Universities'

NUS (2011) *Managing the Risks Associated with External Speakers: Guidance for Students' Unions in England and Wales*. London: NUS

Phillips, D. (2012) 'Unsettling Spaces: Higher Education Institutions in the UK', in W. Allen et al. (eds.) *As the World Turns: Diversity and Global Shifts in Higher Education Theory, Research and Practice*. Bingley: Emerald Group Publishing

Seidler, V.J. (2007) *Jewish Philosophy and Western Culture: A Modern Introduction*. London: I.B. Tauris

Sheldon, R. (forthcoming) *Tragic Encounters and Ordinary Ethics: the Palestine-Israel Conflict in British Universities*. Manchester: Manchester University Press

Strhan, A. (2012) 'Latour, Prepositions and the instauration of secularism'. *Political Theology*, 13(2): 200-216

Universities UK (2011) *Freedom of Speech on Campus: Rights and Responsibilities in UK Universities*. London: Universities UK

¹ All names of institutions, media outlets and individuals have been changed or anonymised and media quotations relating to the events described have been altered in order to protect the identities of the students who participated in this research.

² This includes the entanglements of contemporary universities with the violent histories of antisemitism, colonialism, the ongoing Orientalism, imperialism and securitisation of a post-9/11 era, and with the processes associated with twenty-first century capitalism (Dinham and Jones 2012; Philips 2012; Back 2004; Motademi-Fraser unpublished).

³ While Strhan draws on Bruno Latour's object-oriented ontology, my own approach is informed by Ludwig Wittgenstein's relational philosophical method. This helps us to question assumed dualistic oppositions (such as between discourse and reality) in our framings of religion and secularism whilst also attending to the formations of such bifurcations within particular socio-historical and intellectual contexts.

⁴ Between 2010 and 2012, I conducted participant observation at three universities, attending campus events relating to Israel-Palestine, observing online forums and conducting interviews with members of Jewish, Palestine, Islamic and Socialist Worker student societies and with a student-led Israel-Palestine forum. For further discussion of the methodological, epistemological and ethical questions raised by this research, see Sheldon (forthcoming).

⁵ As Kaposi (2014) observes, the rising importance of Hamas in the Middle East, following their victory in the Gaza elections in 2006 contributed to shifting transnational representations of Israel-Palestine, which has increasingly been narrated in terms of a civilizational clash between Western values and political Islam. At the same time, with growing numbers of Muslim students

entering UK HEIs and participating in student politics, Palestine Societies have been subject to growing surveillance and regulation by politicians and interest groups (Sheldon forthcoming).

⁶ According to this theory, antisemitism has shifted from its traditional right-wing articulations to left-wing movements against Israel and manifests particularly in the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions campaign (see Kahn-Harris and Gidley 2010; Kaposi 2014).

⁷ Following Mahmood (2009), this distinction encodes a differentiation between 'race' or 'ethnicity' as ascribed in contrast to 'religion', which is understood in Protestant terms as belief in a set of propositions and so fundamentally a matter of choice.

⁸ For example, we can consider how the preoccupation with excluding 'fundamentalist ideologies' entails a disavowal of the necessarily embodied, sensuality of rationalist performances within the academy (Hirschkind 2011). As I argue elsewhere (Sheldon forthcoming), this should be situated in relation to the moral and epistemic anxieties experienced by universities under conditions of late capitalism and post-modernity.