



# Ethics in Conversation

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## University Polarisation and the Heterodox Academy

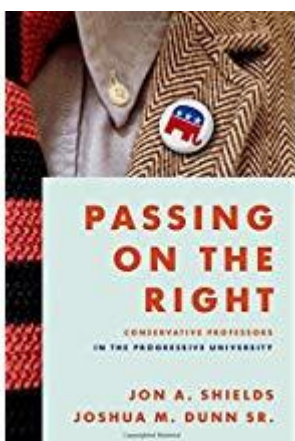
Matthew Rowley

Protests, riots, curtailed speech, disinvited speakers, student intimidation, vandalised monuments and faculty resignation. One does not need to look hard for stories of controversy and chaos in the academy. These accounts contribute to the feeling that campuses, particularly American ones, are fragile and incapable of fostering dialogue or educating students. From economics to estrogen, debates—and the terms in which those debates occur—have become polarised and politicised. Denunciation replaces discussion.

The left-leaning bent of many American Universities is well known. This fuels narratives of victimisation and marginalisation on the right—and these narratives often have more than a grain of truth. Many instructors and institutions are openly hostile to opposing viewpoints, as described by Jon A. Shields and Joshua M. Dunn Sr. in *Passing on the Right: Conservative Professors in the Progressive University*. They note, however, how hostility comes from the academy and is also directed at it: ‘The right, in fact, has long steered young conservatives away from academic careers by highlighting the excesses of far-left professors and the trials of their conservative students. Pillorying the university for its liberalism, of course, has been part of the modern right’s rhetorical arsenal ever since the 1950s when William Buckley penned *God and Man at Yale*. While such polemics do not generally offer explicit career advice, the implicit message has always been that universities are “unsafe spaces” for conservatives’.

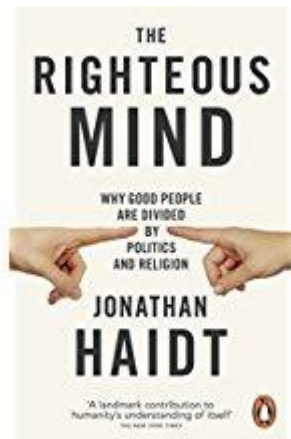
Shields and Dunn shed light on the lived experience of conservatives in academia, and their findings paint a far more complex picture than many discourses of victimisation suggest. Conservatives are not the only ones who feel threatened. With the rise of President Donald Trump, many on the left decry the role of conservative higher education in directing the national agenda. Conservative ideas, once again aligned with power politics, threaten to puncture the feeling of safety on progressive campuses. The left and right, it seems, both feel the others’ boot against their own throat.

In the midst of campus controversies in 2015, the Heterodox Academy (HxA) was conceived and launched. According to the website, the ‘Heterodox Academy is an association of professors and graduate student affiliates who have come together to express their support for increasing viewpoint diversity—particularly political and ideological diversity—in universities’. At the time of this writing, they boasted 1,700 professors and graduate students who are active in many disciplines. These members come from across the political spectrum. The purpose of this short article is to introduce the reader to this energetic and influential group



of academics who are committed to changing the climate on campus. In addition to informing readers of this *movement*, I commend them as a *model*. Space precludes a meaningful discussion of the Christian academy and viewpoint diversity. Many variables would need to be considered depending on nature of the school—particularly when confessional institutions are involved. Still, there are many reasons for confessional institutions to welcome and respect the viewpoints of others.

Jonathan Haidt, Thomas Cooley Professor of Ethical Leadership at New York University, is one of the main thinkers behind the Heterodox Academy. His 2012 bestseller, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by*



*Politics and Religion*, explores the moral intuitions that underly disagreement. He ‘develop[s] the analogy that *the righteous mind is like a tongue with six taste receptors*’—care/harm, fairness/cheating, liberty/oppression, loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion and sanctity/degradation. ‘Liberals’, he argues, ‘have a three-foundation morality [emphasising care/harm, fairness/cheating and liberty/oppression], whereas conservatives use all six’. Conservatives enjoy a broader palate. However, in the three liberal areas of concern, conservative taste buds seem woefully dull. This leads to a situation where both groups can legitimately claim the moral high ground.

Many of the divides discussed in *The Righteous Mind* are evident—and accentuated—on university campuses. HxA describes the problem as follows:

‘The surest sign that a community suffers from a deficit of viewpoint diversity is the presence of orthodoxy, most readily apparent when members fear shame, ostracism, or any other form of social retaliation for questioning or challenging a commonly held idea. In these contexts, it is likely that the dominant idea is not entirely correct because it is protected from challenge and change. If, however, the response to dissent is civil discussion and evidence-based argument, then the community does not suffer from orthodoxy’.

All HxA members agree to the following statement:

*‘I believe that university life requires that people with diverse viewpoints and perspectives encounter each other in an environment where they feel free to speak up and challenge each other. I am concerned that many academic fields and universities currently lack sufficient viewpoint diversity—particularly political diversity. I will support viewpoint diversity in my academic field, my university, my department, and my classroom.’*

These statements are important for two main reasons: First, members pledge to *actively* support viewpoint diversity. This fact alone should undercut dismissive attitudes towards the academy based on generalisations drawn from sensational examples in the news. Second, HxA members believe that diverse opinions are a good thing. They argue that scholarship in many disciplines grinds to a halt the moment dissent is banished. This is why the university needs viewpoint diversity and informed debate. Liberal scholarship is better for having a charitable conservative colleague—and vice versa.

The Heterodox Academy has done little to address *religious* viewpoint diversity on campus. HxA member, Seth Kaplan, recently addressed this lacuna. He is a professorial lecturer in the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University. In ‘Religion: A Viewpoint Diversity Blind Spot?’, he argues that, although HxA ‘membership may be *politically* diverse, few seem interested in directly challenging, or even problematizing, the prevailing secular mindset of the academy’. This is a major omission because

‘religious commitments are arguably more essential to ideological viewpoint diversity than political affiliation. After all, religious belief is likely to be a more integral part of one’s identity, worldview, and community than politics.... Religious students, professors, and administrators do not just hold subjective ideas in their heads — these core commitments help orient every facet other of life. One cannot, therefore, regard those beliefs as something they ought to compartmentalize when approaching research or teaching. Indeed, the impulse to do so is a very recent development’.

Additionally, Kaplan highlights overt religious discrimination on campus.

Not only are religious, especially Judeo-Christian, perspectives downplayed or even suppressed — and overt religious behavior frowned upon — but, in some cases, religious organizations are being expelled from campus life for simply organizing themselves around or expressing beliefs derived from their sacred texts.

Removing religion and the religious from the academy hurts the academy, Kaplan argues.

Disregard for religion impoverishes fields such as sociology, psychology, medicine, and even economics, where belief, religious practice, and community can play an underappreciated yet important role shaping how individuals behave, communities evolve, and even societies develop’.

He then underscores the ‘real-world implications’ of marginalising religion—particularly when it comes to understanding ‘global affairs, where religion plays a prominent role’. Blindsided by the resurgence of belief in recent years, ‘few today are well-versed in the religious beliefs and groups that shape societies from Africa to the Middle East to South Asia and beyond’.

HxA positions could have paradoxical effects that should be guarded against. First, the advocacy of free speech could be taken as a license or encouragement to say any uncomfortable or offensive things on campus. A right to speak can transition into a demand to say anything in as offensive a manner as possible. Second, knowing that esteemed scholars are willing to defend viewpoint diversity on campus could create an environment where minority voices demand ever-increasing power. Right to be heard and participate easily morphs into a new form of exclusion and domination (scholars frequently write of the tendency of ‘rights’ logic to overshoot). Third, HxA is arguing that controversial issues in the university are ‘open for debate’. Debate implies that the final word has not been said. The temptation, then, is to allow the present debate to undergird lazy thinking or scepticism. Debate should enhance critical thinking, not allowing sedimented assumptions to remain unstirred. Fourth, critiques of the secular academy could foster or confirm a smug self-righteousness among outsiders—the very topic addressed in Haidt’s *The Righteous Mind*. Recently, Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt diagnosed problems on American campuses in *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas are Setting Up a Generation for Failure*. American Christian campuses, likewise, are riddled with problems, as detailed in Adam Laats’ *Fundamentalist U: Keeping the Faith in American Higher Education* or as lamented in Mark A. Noll’s *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*. Those in glass universities shouldn’t throw stones.

HxA promotes viewpoint diversity in many ways, a few of which are described below.

1. *The Blog*. The HxA blog is worth visiting regularly. It includes engaging and inclusive articles on pressing issues. Aware that the HxA could become an echo chamber, these articles present diverse viewpoints on viewpoint diversity. The titles alone are enticing:

- ‘Three Strategies for Moral Disagreements’ (Musa Al-Gharbi).
- ‘Teaching Heterodoxy: Syllabus Language to Support Viewpoint Diversity’ (Debra Mashek).
- ‘Professors Now Must Fear Intimidation from Both Sides’ (Jonathan Haidt).
- ‘Why Viewpoint Diversity Also Matters in the Hard Sciences’ (Joseph Conlon).
- ‘Professors Moved Left Since 1990s, Rest of Country Did Not’ (Sam Abrams).
- ‘Psychological Harm and Free Speech on Campus’ (Andrew Cohen).

The blog also features interviews, book reviews and book summaries. Additionally, it updates readers on controversial events on campus. In ‘Half Hour of Heterodoxy’, psychologist Chris Martin interviews leading scholars on issues like ‘diversity, civility, polarization, truth, ideology, pedagogy, and constructive disagreement’. They recently launched an ‘Essential Reading’ section aimed at helping people grasp the arguments of important books on viewpoint diversity.

2. *Commissioned Research*. Here, HxA members summarise scholarship on a pressing issue. This comes in two forms. First, they condense one (or a few) scholarly articles, making the research accessible for non-specialists. For example, articles (all by Sean Stevens) include ‘Intellectual Humility and Openness to the Opposing View’; ‘The Polarizing Effects of Online Partisan Criticism: Evidence from Two Experiments’; ‘The Wisdom of Polarized Crowds’; and ‘Dogmatic Intolerance on the Left and Right’. At other times, HxA members try to show the complexity of an issue by summarising large amounts of scholarship on the topic. The most comprehensive was ‘The Google Memo: What Research Says About Gender Differences’ (Sean Stevens and Jonathan Haidt). In response to the firing of a Google employee over an email on gender and diversity, Stevens and Haidt surveyed current scholarship. In a series of posts, they used *green* font for data that generally supported the claims of the Google employee and *red* for data that generally opposed those claims. The HxA report was lit up like a Christmas tree.

3. *Outside Articles*. The ‘Weekly Roundup of Heterodoxy’ pools articles from the web. Some of these are written by HxA members and published elsewhere. Outlets include *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Forbes*, *National Review*, *The Atlantic*, *The Guardian* and *Vox*.

4. *Open Mind*. This ‘is a free, online platform designed to depolarize communities and foster mutual understanding across differences’. It was launched in 2017 just before Thanksgiving. As polarisation grew in the previous year, Thanksgiving dinner shortened—by 20–30 minutes on average in politically divided households. Open Mind helps people understand worldviews they reject. Although differences will often remain, Open Mind helps facilitate constructive conversations on taboo topics.

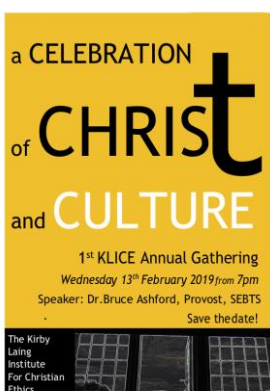
5. *Campus Expression Survey*. This survey allows the HxA to put its finger on the pulse of the academy and, in the words of one article, find out ‘Who is afraid to speak, and why?’ It looks at formal and informal intimidation on a range of issues, and this chilled environment can be fostered by students and staff alike.

6. *Guide to Colleges*. If there is one thing universities care about, it is their rankings. Traditional rankings do not consider *viewpoint* diversity (among staff or student). HxA thinks students looking for a university should be aware that they could enter an ideologically rigid and unwelcoming environment. ‘The HxA Guide to Colleges begins with the US News list of the top 150 universities and the top 50 liberal arts schools’. In the HxA June 2017 rankings, the top universities included The University of Chicago, Purdue, George Mason and The College of William and Mary. The University of Chicago has been at the forefront of fostering viewpoint diversity, and several other universities have adopted the ‘Chicago Principles’. At the bottom of the rankings are Yale, Cornell, Fordham, Georgia Tech, Harvard, University of California - Berkeley, Rutgers, Northwestern and The University of Oregon. These rankings are increasingly mentioned in campus newspapers and national outlets like *The Wall Street Journal*.

7. *Awards*. At the first annual Open Mind Conference (June 2018), HxA honoured institutions and individuals who model and promote viewpoint diversity. The University of Chicago received the Institutional Excellence Award for its role as ‘a national leader in modeling an institutional commitment to free speech and open inquiry’. Robert P. George (Princeton) and Cornel West (Harvard) ‘earned the first Leadership Award for their shared efforts to marshal support for viewpoint diversity throughout academia’. ‘Stylistically and politically’, writes Colleen Flaherty for *Inside Higher Education*, the pair ‘don’t have much in common’. However, the two have long been friends, taught courses together and toured publicly—speaking on topics ranging from Augustine to abortion. Alice Dreger, a historian of science and medicine, received the Courage Award for her stand against scholarly censorship at Northwestern University. Tenelle Porter and Karina Schumann were given the Exceptional Scholarship award for their article ‘Intellectual Humility and Openness to the Opposing View’ published in *Self and Identity*. BridgeUSA was honoured with the Outstanding Student Group Award for the organisations’ ‘commitment, convening power, and constructive approach to difficult conversations’. Finally, Lindsay Shepherd (graduate at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, Ontario) and Zachary R. Wood (undergraduate at Williams College) received the Outstanding Student Awards for their promotion of difficult conversations on and off campus.



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**1<sup>st</sup> KLICE Annual Gathering**  
**Wednesday 13<sup>th</sup> February 2019, from 7pm at Tyndale House, Cambridge.**

Numbers are strictly limited, but it would be wonderful to see as many of you there as possible as we unveil the KLICE vision and witness the official inauguration of our Research Institute Fellows!

To reserve your place, please email our Development Officer Genevieve Wedgbury on [klice.development@tyndalehouse.com](mailto:klice.development@tyndalehouse.com).