

Cambridge Theological Federation: Statement on Freedom of Speech and Expression

Context

1. The Cambridge Theological Federation is required by law to outline principles for its members in relation to their right to freedom of speech in the context of other legal responsibilities of the Federation. This Statement takes into account the specific legal responsibilities, as set out in Section 43 of the Education (No 2) Act 1986, the Equality Act 2010 and the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015.
2. This Statement outlines the principles of free speech which apply to all members of the Federation, staff or students connected to the Federation, and visiting speakers (i.e. speakers who are not members of the Federation or one of its constituent University bodies, namely the University of Cambridge, University of Durham, Anglia Ruskin University or any other University through which a member of the Federation is matriculated for their course of study).

Principles

3. The Cambridge Theological Federation is strongly committed to the principle of freedom of speech and expression. It fosters an environment where all of its members can participate fully in the life of the Federation, and where each member feels confident and able to research, question and test received wisdom, and to express new ideas and controversial or unpopular opinions, without fear of isolation, marginalisation or discrimination. Equally, the Federation expects its members to receive and respond to intellectual and ideological challenges in a constructive and peaceable way. The Federation acknowledges its statutory duties in protecting its members and other people from “radicalisation”, in terms of the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015. See Appendix 1 for the ethos of freedom of speech and expression which the Federation embraces.
4. Subject to paragraph 3 above, no premises of the Federation and/or respective Houses will be denied to any member or body of members by reason of the beliefs or views of that individual or of that body or the policy or objectives of that body. Whoever is acting on behalf of the Federation and/or respective Houses will have regard to the mission and ethos of the Federation and/or respective Houses, validating institutions, or national religious bodies.
5. In holding to these key principles, the Federation will take into account its obligations regarding freedom of speech, the management of the health and safety of its members and the general public, the promotion of equal opportunities and prevention of discrimination on the grounds of belief, ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation or other legally-protected characteristics, and its duties associated with preventing people from being drawn into terrorism or the promotion of terrorist activities.

As an example of this, the Federation reserves the right to refuse access to its premises if it is of the opinion that a visiting speaker or the purpose of a meeting is likely to give rise to the incitement of crime and/or is likely to cause a breach of the peace.

Policies and procedures

6. In determining the likelihood of risk of harm to members of the Federation and/or the general public, or members of the Federation being drawn into terrorism, or otherwise promoting any violent or illegal action, the constituent bodies of the Federation or the Federation as a whole publishes policies and/or procedures to set out and manage:
 - a) the behavioural expectations of students (see respective House policies);
 - b) the management of events within the Federation at which controversial views may be expressed (whether or not they are held within the Federation); and
 - c) the management and conduct of visiting speakers at meetings held within the Federation (see Federation policy).

APPENDIX 1

Freedom of Speech and Expression

Based on University of Chicago Statement on Freedom

Because the Cambridge Theological Federation is committed to free and open inquiry in all matters, it guarantees all members of the Cambridge Theological Federation community the broadest possible latitude to speak, write, listen, challenge, and learn. Except insofar as limitations on that freedom are necessary to the functioning of the Cambridge Theological Federation, the Cambridge Theological Federation fully respects and supports the freedom of all members of the Cambridge Theological Federation community "to discuss any problem that presents itself."

Of course, the ideas of different members of the Cambridge Theological Federation community will often and quite naturally conflict. But it is not the proper role of the Cambridge Theological Federation to attempt to shield individuals from ideas and opinions they find unwelcome, disagreeable, or even deeply offensive. Although the Cambridge Theological Federation greatly values civility, and although all members of the Cambridge Theological Federation community share in the responsibility for maintaining a climate of mutual respect, concerns about civility and mutual respect can never be used as a justification for closing off discussion of ideas, however offensive or disagreeable those ideas may be to some members of our community.

The freedom to debate and discuss the merits of competing ideas does not, of course, mean that individuals may say whatever they wish, wherever they wish. The Cambridge Theological Federation may restrict expression that violates the law that falsely defames a specific individual that constitutes a genuine threat or harassment, that unjustifiably invades substantial privacy or confidentiality interests, or that is otherwise directly incompatible with the functioning of the Cambridge Theological Federation. In addition, the Cambridge Theological Federation may reasonably regulate the time, place, and manner of expression to ensure that it does not disrupt the ordinary activities of the Cambridge Theological Federation. But these are narrow exceptions to the general principle of freedom of expression, and it is vitally important that these exceptions never be used in a manner that is inconsistent with the Cambridge Theological Federation's commitment to a completely free and open discussion of ideas.

In a word, the Cambridge Theological Federation's fundamental commitment is to the principle that debate or deliberation may not be suppressed because the ideas put forth are thought by some or even by most members of the Cambridge Theological Federation community to be offensive, unwise, immoral, or wrong-headed. It is for the individual members of the Cambridge Theological Federation community, not for the Cambridge Theological Federation as an institution, to make those judgements for themselves, and to act on those judgements not by seeking to suppress speech, but by openly and vigorously contesting the ideas that they oppose. Indeed, fostering the ability of members of the Cambridge Theological Federation community to engage in such debate and deliberation in an effective and responsible manner is an essential part of the Cambridge Theological Federation's educational mission.

As a corollary to the Cambridge Theological Federation's commitment to protect and promote free expression, members of the Cambridge Theological Federation community must also act in conformity with the principle of free expression. Although members of the Cambridge Theological Federation community are free to criticize and contest the views expressed on campus, and to criticize and contest speakers who are invited to express their views on campus, they may not obstruct or otherwise interfere with the freedom of others to express views they reject or even loathe. To this end the Cambridge Theological Federation has a solemn responsibility not only to promote a lively and fearless freedom of debate and deliberation, but also to protect that freedom when others attempt to restrict it.