

Toby Young Interview

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Simon: Well Toby Young, journalist and free speech campaigner, thank you very much for joining us today. I was fascinated doing the background research for this to find out that there's a Simon Pegg movie loosely based on your memoirs called 'How to Lose Friends & Alienate People'. Now you strike me as a very affable chap. That title doesn't really describe your approach to life does it?

Toby: Yeah, well, I've, I've, I've mellowed a bit since that period of my life, but, but the, the film is based on a book I wrote of the same name about my efforts to take Manhattan as a journalist in the mid-90s. And I went out there to work for Vanity Fair and thought, you know, I'd have the Big Apple in the palm of my hand, you know, within months and it all it all it all went completely pear shaped, and I lost my job at Vanity Fair and then lost a succession of other jobs and came back to London with kind of fairly chastened five years later, but wrote a memoir about trying and failing to take Manhattan, which was then turned into a film, but I kind of slightly exaggerated how obnoxious I was just for comic effect. [2:00]

Simon: So, so, as an odd segue now into education, I mean, your great passion in life has been, alongside free speech, has been education. You've set up schools to try to help improve chances for young people. Why do you feel so strongly about education?

Toby: Well, the reason I became interested in education is because my wife and I had four children in fairly quick succession. Em, at one point, we worked out that she had been pregnant for more than 50% of the time over a five year period. So four children quite closely bunched, and so naturally started thinking about where they were going to go to school. And there was some reasonably good primary schools where we lived in Shepherds Bush, but to get into the good secondary schools, you needed to either be a Catholic or Church of England. We used to live virtually kind of within the school gates. And we initially thought, well the easiest thing will just be to move to within the good catchment area, within the catchment area, of a good state school. And we thought about moving to Framlingham in Suffolk, and I thought, you know, why are we turning our lives upside down and moving halfway across the country, just to secure our children a decent education you know, we pay our taxes, there really should be a decent state school for kind of secular parents who don't happen to live within 500 yards of the school where we live. And at that time the Conservatives were talking about making it easier for parent groups and other charitable groups to set up free schools. And so I thought, well why don't we try and set up a school ourselves instead? And I invited anyone who was interested in helping out to come to a meeting at my house in Shepherds Bush and about 150 people replied, about 75 came over to my house crowded into my front room and out of that group, about 12 people emerged who were really kind of keen and energetic. And that became the steering committee of what was the, what became, the West London Free School, which was one of the first free schools, well it was the first free school to sign a funding agreement with Michael Gove [4:00] and one of the first 22 to open. Boris opened the school in 2011. He said, the Secretary of State has given us a new word, a new word in the English language, we give, they gave, he Gove. He Gove us this school. That was when they were, before they had fallen out, and then became friends again. But it's a small but growing multi-academy trust now. I'm not as involved as I was, I'm still a little bit involved on the fundraising side, but three of my children are still there. The fourth has now graduated, off to university. Em, but er yeah, and this, the type of education offered by the school is what we describe as a classical liberal education. So quite similar, actually to the sort of education you'd get at the local C of E school, the local Catholic school, or a decent private school, an old-fashioned grammar school, but non-selective so available to all regardless of faith or ability. I think it has had a kind of impact on the rest of the sector, which was the kind of original, one of the original justifications for the free school programme, you know, create a space for a bit of

innovation within the kind of state, state school sector. And if something works, then the rest of the sector can start replicating it and that has begun to happen.

Simon: So your Father, Lord Young of Dartington, he was very influential in Labour Party politics, but it was a Conservative Government that later offered you a job in education. I noticed that you managed to sustain for a few years at least, being a restaurant critic for the Left wing Independent newspaper whilst being a columnist at the Right wing Spectator. I mean, do you find it easy to maintain relationships with people across the political spectrum? Or is it all just too tribal these days?

Toby: It certainly, it certainly, it feels like it's a bit more polarised than it was. Brexit I think had quite a polarising effect. But generally, no, I've always found it quite easy [6:00] to be friends with people I don't agree with and, and I guess it helped kind of growing up in the household I did. So my father was a sort of lifelong socialist and initially in a Communist Party, then the Labour Party, then the SDP, then back to the Labour Party. And but you know, there were always kind of people with different views around the kind of supper table and you know, they like nothing more than to argue that was their kind of, you know, meat and bread to them. And one of the things actually that surprised me about the direction the kind of Left has taken with kind of, you know, the woke and identity politics is that they've sort of lost their passion for arguing seemingly, you know, when you try and engage a member of the woke Left in an argument about, you know, should trans women be able to compete with women in women's sports? Should they have access to safe women's spaces and so forth? They don't want to argue about it. And they think if you think that there is a genuine debate to be had here, then you're just the enemy. You know, if you think that there is a conflict between sex-based women's rights and trans rights, you're a transphobe, you're a bigot, I don't want to talk to you. Or sometimes, you know, if you ask them a question, you know, a slightly kind of challenging question. Pointing out a little bit of tension, you know, in their in their worldview, they'll say, well I can't be bothered to explain it to you, it's exhausting explaining these things to people like you. It's like well, 25 years ago, sitting around my father's dinner table, people like used to love nothing more than explaining this stuff to people like me and arguing about it. And you know, staying up late finishing bottles of wine and endlessly kind of debating and arguing, but they seem to have lost their interest in arguing or maybe it's just they think it's a more effective way to advance their agenda is to pretend that it's going to be on dispute and anyone who challenges is just completely beyond the pale.

Simon: Yeah, yeah. So we've got onto free speech and again, your evident [8:00] immense passion for free speech. So Christian Institute supporters will probably know you mainly for your work with the Free Speech Union, but for anybody watching who doesn't know what the Free Speech Union does, would you like to explain?

Toby: Yes. So what I, one thing you've politely glossed over is the fact that I was cancelled myself at the beginning of 2018 when Theresa May appointed me as a Non-Executive Director of the Office for Students, a new higher education regulator in England. And for, I was I was targeted by you know, offence archaeologists who kind of trawled through everything I'd said or written, dating back in one case to 1987, to find reasons why I was an unsuitable person to kind of serve on this new body. And after a kind of week of being deluged with all this stuff people were digging up, some of it was a little bit embarrassing, I stepped down from the Office for Students and apologised for some of the more sophomoric things I'd said late at night on Twitter, etc. And, and I thought that would draw a line under it, but that turned out to be like throwing up, you know, red meat to a shoal of Parana fish, you know blood in the water, let's go crazy. And so I ended up having to step down from four other positions, including from the, as a trustee of the multi-academy trust I'd set up that the school sat within. That was quite a wrench having to kind of separate myself from that project which had been my kind of life's work for the previous 10 years. Anyway, lost five positions in total. So was well and truly cancelled. And, and when I sort of recovered from that experience, I thought to myself, well, when I was going through that there was no kind of organisation out there that I could reach out to for support for kind of good professional advice on whether I could kind of sue anyone who kind of libelled me. PR advice, should I have apologised? If so, what should I have said? [10:00] I think apologising probably turned out to be a mistake, but that wasn't obvious at the time. It felt like the right thing to do, to you know make the kind of mob of journalists standing outside my house on my doorstep stopping my kids from going to school, disperse, but turned out I think to be an error. And, and I thought, well you know, maybe there's room for setting up an organisation that can provide that kind of full spectrum support, even psychological counselling to

people going through a similar experience. And at that stage, you know, it didn't look as though cancel culture was, you know, in retreat. So it looked like there was a kind of real need for an organisation that could provide that kind of support and initially I wanted to set it up as a membership organisation, but just for people involved in some way in the dissemination of ideas, whether journalists, novelists, poets, screenwriters, artists, but then I thought why restrict it, you know, cancel mobs don't restrict who they cancel to just people, just kind of intellectuals and writers. Everybody's at risk. And so we just threw it open to everyone. And that was in February 2020. And then cancel culture then kind of seemed to escalate quite dramatically with the pandemic and Black Lives Matter. So suddenly, we were kind of quite quickly overwhelmed with kind of requests for help from people who were kind of in the crosshairs of these Twitter mobs. And since then, it's grown. So it's, we've now got more than 9000 members about 15 employees. We've helped hundreds of people. About a good third of them are students or academics, you know, getting into trouble for exercising their lawful right to free speech in, in in the higher education sector. We've got quite a lot of Christians actually of various kinds. So we got involved with a campaign to get a ban on the Wilberforce Academy lifted, which was imposed by Worcester College. [12:00] The new incoming provost of, I think provost is the right word, of Worcester, David Isaac, former chair of Stonewall. He, he, some trans, well some student activists complained about the presence of the Wilberforce Academy, which is a kind of Christian summer school who'd rented rooms at Worcester over the summer of 21. They complained that they'd been disseminating transphobic literature, you know, arguing, and homophobic literature, and they kind of got in the faces of students and sixth formers visiting Worcester as part of their kind of outreach programme. Kind of, kind of, you know, hectoring them about why they shouldn't be gay and it all turned out to be complete nonsense. But the activists complained to David Isaac and instead of undergoing any proper kind of investigation to see what had happened and whether these allegations were true, he immediately kind of issued an apology and said from now on, you know, the Wilberforce Academy won't be setting foot in Worcester College, and so Christian Concern and the Free Speech Union wrote to him. Christian Concern commissioned an independent report from a solicitor to look into what had actually happened. Turned out none of the allegations were true and, and last week I think it was, Christian Concern and Worcester issued a joint statement, saying, you know, they've made a mistake and they'd apologised a few months earlier, and they invited, David Isaac has invited Christian Concern to come back to the College to engage in a proper debate. The ban on the Wilberforce Academy has been lifted. So I mean it took about a year to get to that point.

Simon: But that was a big win though.

Toby: That was a big win, yeah, yeah. And they've been lots of other similar examples.

Simon: So I just want to pick up, so you used the word wrench. You said it was a wrench for you to kind of be forced to break off your association with the schools you'd worked so hard to set up. And you talked about how invasive all this was to your private life. And [14:00] then you talked about the fact that FSU offers psychological counselling. I mean, if you don't mind me asking you, it must have had a huge psychological impact on you personally, all that you went through.

Toby: Yeah. I mean, however, kind of, one thing, a sort of recurring theme, I think, amongst the people who've gone through this experience, is they don't realise how psychologically traumatic it is. Even people who think of themselves as pretty psychologically robust, like I do, find it kind of quite difficult when it's essentially being kind of stripped of your dignity in the public square. It's a kind of, it's like being kind of placed in the stalks. Having your name kind of traduced in the press, in the mainstream media. And I remember sitting at home and seeing Dawn Butler on Question time, when this issue was live. I'd been appointed, I hadn't resigned, the Labour Party were clamouring for me to go, there was a petition signed by 220,000 people urging Theresa May to sack me, and Dawn Butler said that I had I had written something saying that disabled people should be weeded out of the population, I mean made up out of whole cloth. And, and you know I have a mentally disabled brother, and he's been in a kind of care home for decades, and the idea that he was watching that, or that his kind of carers were watching that with him, was really wrenching. And there was no one on the panel pushing back. And I did think about well should I sue Dawn Butler for libel and I kind of went a little way down that road and then in the end, I thought, well, it's just going to drag it out for another year and you know, she can crowdfund and get hundreds of thousands of pounds and I might not win, you know, even though it is, because she might be able to argue that I had no reputation to destroy in the first place, [16:00] which is apparently a defence in libel. Anyway, but, but yeah, the feeling that you're kind of

name is just being dragged through the mud, and how, and there's just nothing you can do about it. Nothing you can do to kind of defend yourself because no one wants to listen and the general advice you get is, you know, just shut up and lie doggo and you know this, the less you say the sooner it will go away and it'll be over. And but that was that was traumatic, the feeling that you've lost control of your life. It was as though a little demon, kind of got hold of the steering wheel of my life and kind of, and was driving it into the kind of oncoming lorries, and there was nothing I could do, I was just a kind of helpless passenger. I actually talked to a psychologist about it later and, and he'd gone through a very similar experience himself. And he said that when talking to Christian patients of his who'd suffered a bereavement, so if, particularly if one of their children, if a child had died of a terminal disease and they had themselves been pious Christians all their lives, there was this feeling that, you know, there was that, that that their, their, their faith was kind of shaken. And this this kind of feeling of why, why is it happening to me, when I've been a kind of pious Christian all my life, you know, why is God testing me in this way? And that's kind of, that's one of the things that they find most difficult about kind of tragedies of that kind befalling them. And nothing like that happened. I mean it was obviously not on that scale, but I hadn't, but I nevertheless felt that I had been a kind of good person, you know, observed the social contract, always tried to be kind of kind to people and help people in need and so forth. Been a decent father and husband. So why was this happening to me? And I realised that I'd, I was entertaining what the psychologists said was, was the just world fallacy. If you're not a Christian you think the idea that you live if you're, you know, [18:00] if you're an, if you're an agnostic or an atheist, you think the idea that you live in a just universe is an illusion. There isn't such a thing as karma. There is no justice in the world. It's just a series of kind of random events happening to you. And, but I thought that that's what I'd always believed. But when this happened to me, I realised actually, without quite knowing it, I had been, you know, entertaining the just world fallacy. So even though I hadn't imagined that I thought we lived in a just universe, the fact that all these things were happening to me when I thought that I'd been a good person felt terribly unjust. And that was quite kind of, that was kind of one of the hardest things to cope with. That sense of kind of confusion. It's like almost like, you know, was a bit like unreciprocated love. You know, you feel like you've done something good. You're offering something really valuable and precious to somebody, and they're rejecting it. It was as though kind of, you know, in spite of all the good work I tried to do, I was being rejected, I was being thought of as a kind of bad person. And one of the kind of things I think which makes being cancelled really difficult, is that I think there's the kind of woke cult, this kind of feverish kind of group Identitarians on the Left, they've taken on quite a lot of aspects of kind of Christianity. It's as though as the Christian tide has ebbed away, so it's left some things behind. And these have been taken up by people to help fill the kind of God-shaped hole left by the retreat of Christianity, and the decline of, you know, Christian worship. And, but they've taken, they've taken the kind of bad bits and left the good bits.

Simon: Twisted things out of shape and yeah.

Toby: Twisted things completely out of shape. So one of the kind of attractive things about, you know, certainly modern Christianity, is this distinction between the sin and the sinner. And if you transgress, then but you are kind of penitent, then you can be kind of readmitted into [20:00] the community.

Simon: Forgiveness.

Toby: Forgiveness.

Simon: Fancy that.

Toby: But in the kind of 'woke Church', there is no forgiveness.

Simon: Right.

Toby: Once you've transgressed, that's it. You're, you're, you're cast out, and there's no way back. And, and there's no distinction between the sin and the sinner. If you've sinned, you know, if you've transgressed, if you've, if you've, if you've breached one of our sacred values, then you're a bad person, you're evil, and you just need to be expelled.

Simon: And there's a huge dose of self-righteousness in it as well, isn't there? It's about, I'm a better person than you because I believe this and you don't. Isn't that right?

Toby: Yeah. Yeah. There's a kind of, there's, there's a there's a there's a, there's an unwillingness to accept that someone who doesn't agree with you about these fundamental things, could still be a good person and just kind of honestly disagree. They think if you disagree with them, you're either extremely stupid or evil. Or they see things in terms of kind of people acting in the interests of their identity groups. They often attribute, they think if you don't agree with them it's because you're wanting to preserve the power of your particular identity group.

Simon: So we've talked about religion, we've talked about politics, you've talked about growing up when you know people would love to kind of have debates with you about these things. And we talked about how today, just people just find it very hard to accept, you know, the existence of other opinions. How do we rehabilitate this? How do we re-establish the ability of people to have robust disagreements about these really important issues, without falling out, without trying to silence one another?

Toby: Yeah. Well, I think we have to try and understand why it is that it's become harder and harder to disagree about kind of fundamental values in the public square, without kind of falling out with each other. And, and why has cancel culture kind of metastasised and become such an all-encompassing kind of blight? And I think it's [22:00] something to do, I think again it goes back to the kind of ebbing away of the Christian tide. You know, in the 19th century, even in the first part of the 20th century, we were a Christian society. And you know, the sacred values we were expected to observe were Christian values. And you know, if someone committed adultery or got divorced, or they were born out of wedlock, you know, that that was, that was, there was serious social stigma attached to that. And then, and I think, you know, we had a kind of public morality, which people were expected to observe. And if they didn't, you know, they were, you know, sort of outcast or they were kind of in a kind of Bohemian subculture. And there was some tolerance for people who didn't believe. I think more tolerance, you know, particularly towards the end of the 19th century in the higher education sector towards kind of people who challenged the prevailing orthodoxies. More tolerance than, than there is now. But I think, so as, as, as the Christian tide ebbed away, so this public morality began to fade, particularly in the 1960s and the 1970s. And all the taboos which had kind of constrained people's behaviour, the moral taboos began to fall away, and there was a kind of brief period in which we enjoy this kind of intellectual sexual freedom. But it, everyone thought that was just what the future was going to be, but then, interestingly, people seemingly kind of found it quite difficult to cope with that degree of freedom. And they've embraced another, even more dogmatic morality, which in the past 10/15 years has [24:00] become the public morality. So we've kind of, after, after a kind of brief interlude, one public morality has been replaced by another, and if you don't sign up to the kind of articles of faith of that public morality, you're now outcast, probably more outcast than you were if you didn't sign up to the articles of the Christian faith in the 19th century, the early 20th century. And I think that's really what's happened. We've embraced this new secular public morality, which is actually interestingly much more puritanical and censorious and authoritarian than the seemingly much more gentle Christian public morality, which at least allowed for forgiveness and a path back – redemption – which this new public morality doesn't seem to allow for. And I think that that's what's going on. That's why we live in an increasingly intolerant society. That's why if you don't sign up to the kind of shibboleths of the 'woke Church', you end up kind of cast out and curiously, lots of people who do find themselves at odd with the articles of faith of the new public morality are orthodox Christians.

Simon: Yeah. Well, thank you. Thank you for that.

Toby: Thank you. And just, just, anyone watching this, if if they are concerned that they themselves might be targeted by a Twitter mob just for expressing orthodox Christian views, they really should join. It's not expensive. For discount members, students, pensioners, anyone on benefits, membership starts at £2.49 a month. Anyone who is interested in joining, www.freespeechunion.org. And yeah, we are a very broad Church and we, we're well practised at defending Christians who find themselves in the crosshairs.

Simon: Well Toby, it's just been so interesting speaking to you today. Thank you very much for making the time to come and speak to us. Thank you for all you're doing to defend free speech for everybody. Toby Young, thank you so much. [26:00]

Toby: Thanks.