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Political Correctness

Roy Gane
Andrews University, gane@andrews.edu

Memory, Meaning & Faith

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Political Correctness

Political correctness (adjectivally, politically correct; both forms commonly abbreviated to PC) is a term which denotes language, ideas, policies, and behavior seen as seeking to minimize social and institutional offense in occupational, gender, racial, cultural, sexual orientation, disability, and age-related contexts. In current usage, the term is primarily pejorative, while the term politically incorrect has been used as an implicitly positive self-description... In these cases, the term politically incorrect connotes language, ideas, and behavior unconstrained by a perceived orthodoxy or by concerns about offending or expressing bias regarding various groups of people.

Current usage
Widespread use of the term politically correct and its derivatives began when it was adopted as a pejorative term by the political right in the 1990s, in the context of the Culture Wars. Writing in the New York Times in 1990, Richard Bernstein noted "The term 'politically correct,' with its suggestion of Stalinist orthodoxy, is spoken more with irony and disapproval than with reverence. But across the country the term p.c., as it is commonly abbreviated, is being heard more and more in debates over what should be taught at the universities."...

Within a few years, this previously obscure term featured regularly in the lexicon of the conservative social and political challenges against curriculum expansion and progressive teaching methods in US high schools and universities. In 1991, addressing a graduating class of the University of Michigan, U.S. President George H. W. Bush spoke against "a movement [that would] declare certain topics 'off-limits', certain expressions 'off-limits', even certain gestures 'off-limits'" in allusion to liberal Political Correctness. The most common usage here is as a pejorative term to refer to excessive deference to particular sensibilities at the expense of other considerations...

The central uses of the term relate to particular issues of race, gender, handicaps, ethnicity, sexual preference, culture and worldviews, and encompass both the language in which issues are discussed and the viewpoints that are expressed.

("Political correctness," Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Political_correctness)

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Last week my husband laughed as I suggested that we build a snowperson. "A snowperson? I like how you made that gender neutral." I had done it unintentionally, but then I got to liking it :)

I guess I like politically correct speech.

Posted by: Kessia Reyne | [December 16, 2010 at 10:38 PM](#)

I like gender-inclusive speech too, as long as it isn't pushed to the ridiculous, e.g.: "Ladies and Gentlepersons!". It makes good sense and recognizes the important female segment of our society. Insofar as gender-inclusiveness is embraced by political correctness, that can be a positive aspect of the PC approach, which for me is problematic mainly when it is used as an explicit or unconscious authority over biblical principles. By the way, when I translated Leviticus for the new Common English Bible translation, one of the directions from the editorial board was to try to be gender-inclusive. This can be a challenge when translating from Hebrew, in which masculine is the default grammatical gender. But it is often doable. However, I think the NRSV goes too far (at least in Lev) by translating "he" (a single offerer) as "they" to be gender-inclusive, which makes it a plural, as though more than one person is offering a sacrifice. We need a singular gender-neutral pronoun, but there doesn't seem to be one in English. Maybe we should invent one. Any ideas? (S)he works pretty well, but what about her/him and hers/his? How can we combine these?

Posted by: Roy E. Gane | [December 21, 2010 at 11:51 AM](#)

A singular gender-netural pronoun would be pretty handy, but I'm not sure if we'll ever get one. I'm actually in favor of changing one of the long-standing rules of the English language that "they" and "their" are exclusively plural. "Any person with a ticket can redeem their prize online" is technically incorrect for mashing up a singular subject and a plural possessive pronoun, but such a construction would prove very useful, especially in a world where the masculine pronoun no longer suffices to represent individuals of both genders. In fact, we're seeing just such language online where the Internet cannot determine your gender and doesn't want to sound offensive or old-fashioned. So Facebook recently told me that "Jerilyn Smith changed their profile picture." I'm keeping my fingers crossed that in the next 25 years such language will be acceptable and standard. Until then, I and my snowperson will be contemplating the implications of gendered pronouns...

Posted by: Kessia Reyne | [January 03, 2011 at 01:26 PM](#)

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