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Reduction of academic freedom diminishes education

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The dismissal of Brigham Young University adjunct philosophy instructor Jeffrey Nielsen, on account of an op-ed published in these pages, brings to light several important issues regarding academic freedom in different institutional settings.

First is the difference between private and public academic freedom. The mission of BYU is the study of reason circumscribed by faith. Recently at Utah Valley State College, President Kim Clark responded to my question about academic freedom at BYU-Idaho by stating that open inquiry is unfettered as long as this scope is respected.

Those critical of Nielsen's firing are quick to point to the American Association of University Professors ongoing censure of BYU for violations of academic freedom. This criticism, however, misses the point. Private institutions have the right to implement rules and enforce them, no matter how unfounded those rules may be to public sensibilities. As long as professors choose to teach, students choose to enroll and the LDS church chooses to fund, BYU has every right to its own standards.

Second are the differences among private institutions. Both Nielsen and I did graduate work at Boston College, a Jesuit school, where one morning I saw the chairman of the philosophy department coming down the hall clutching *The Future of an Illusion* and *The Communist Manifesto*. After greeting him, I remarked on the strange choice of reading material for a Jesuit priest. He looked into my eyes and said, "David, I've got to master Freud and Marx so I can explain how they went wrong."

This experience contrasts with another at UVSC. I enrolled in a general biology course, and, on the day we reached the topic of evolution, attendance dropped from 70 to seven. Puzzled, I quizzed the instructor, who informed me that this happens semester after semester. Students decide that evolution is something they do not wish to learn about - before they learn about it.

The lesson is that religious cultures have dissimilar philosophies of education. One approach is to learn about many subjects in order to engage in dialogue with others, bolstering and promoting one's faith; the other is to avoid topics which are inconsistent with one's faith with the worry that such exposure could threaten spirituality. Catholics seem to favor the former approach, LDS and evangelical Protestants the latter.

No wonder Notre Dame philosophy professor Janet Kournay expressed befuddlement on KUER's

RadioWest June 19 regarding Nielsen and BYU. Kournay pointed out that Mark Roche, dean of the Notre Dame College of Arts and Letters, publicly questioned in a *The New York Times* op-ed ("The Bishops and the Catholic Vote," Oct. 11, 2004) the alignment of Catholic bishops with the Republican Party.

Presumably, as inquisitive persons of faith, Roche and Nielsen had the same motivation in publishing their opinions. But the outcome was opposite. Roche set an example for thinking Catholics, while Nielsen set himself up for disciplinary action.

Third is the question of the role of education in the drama of democracy. Given the case at hand, is the on-campus silencing of reasoned concerns by an instructor a favorable example for students preparing for civil dialogue with persons of a plurality of perspectives in the public square?

The answer is no. Democracy cannot function without an educated citizenry. This requires students be well-versed on complex public-policy issues. Muting voices in a critical preparatory stage for citizenship hinders moral education and hampers civic engagement, no matter the institutional setting.

Moral injunctions by the upper hierarchy of any social organization affect the common good. Such injunctions consequently are fair game for informed critique and frank discussion, those of ecclesiastical leadership not excluded.

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