

Academic Freedom: Could This Happen in Your Class?

The following is an abridged version of a speech given at the COCAL academic freedom panel on August 13, 2006 by Douglas Giles, philosophy instructor from Chicago.

A year ago I was naïve about the issue of academic freedom. Certainly, I supported the freedom of instructors to teach and students to learn, but I had assumed that academic freedom was only threatened in other countries or in the distant past. Since then, I have received the hard, sobering education that can come only from living through and struggling against injustice.

I have always been an idealist, which is why I majored in and now teach philosophy and religion. I am fascinated by ideas and beliefs and try to share that enthusiasm with my students. I believe that essential to education is exposure to diverse viewpoints and cultures and encouraging students to openly and critically consider those diverse ideas. I welcome questions in class and allow students to share their opinions and experiences. The nature of philosophy and religion is particularly amenable to this approach, and my students enjoy hearing diverse views and being encouraged to explore and share ideas and beliefs openly.

In the fall term of 2005, my journey from naïve idealist to committed academic freedom activist began. I was teaching my fourth semester as a contingent adjunct at Roosevelt University in Chicago. Roosevelt's Chair of the Department of History, Art History and Philosophy, Susan Weininger, is an administrator and art history professor who has never taught religion or philosophy. Other than the interview in which she hired me in December 2003, she and I had not spoken before a series of phone calls she placed to me at my home in September 2005.

In these phone calls, she told me that she was disturbed to hear that I allowed open questions and discussion in my world religions class. She told me that "your job as a professor is to give only the basic facts about religions and nothing more." She said I was not to spend so much time in class answering student questions and not to respond to questions on certain topics. The topics to avoid she told me were:

- Nothing should be mentioned in class, textbooks, or examinations that could possibly open up Judaism to criticism, especially any mention in any context of Zionism
- Nothing related to Palestinians or Islamic beliefs about Jerusalem should be mentioned
- Any discussion of Zionism or the Palestinian issue was in her words "disrespectful to any Jews in the class"

I replied that those restrictions would lead to a biased class and I would not do it. She then made a series of disparaging comments about Palestinians concluding with the following:

"I hear you even allowed a Muslim to speak in class."

"Yes, of course, I allowed all students to speak, regardless of their religion!"

"You shouldn't! What disturbs me is that you act like the Palestinians have a side in this. They don't have a side! They are ANIMALS! They are NOT CIVILIZED!"

She then ordered me never to bring up the conversation again to anyone and hung up. I did report the conversations to my union representative. A few days later, I received an e-mail from Weininger saying I would no longer be teaching at Roosevelt, not just the world religions classes I was scheduled to teach next semester—but ever. Roosevelt later termed it a "non-reappointment"; however, I think it is fair to call a permanent ban a job termination.

The reason for my termination is clear. Because I allowed open and respectful discussion of Judaism and Islam in my classes, I am now censored from teaching at Roosevelt. As bizarre, though, as Weininger's statements and action are, they are matched by the ensuing actions of Roosevelt University. There are two dimensions to the academic freedom violation. First is the blatant censorship of student and faculty discussion perpetrated by Weininger. Second is the attempt by Roosevelt to dismantle the rights of adjunct faculty even if it means defending blatant bigotry and censorship.

I am extremely fortunate to have as my union representative Joe Berry, the man who literally wrote the book on the struggles of contingent faculty. Thanks in large part to Joe's advocacy, my union, the Roosevelt Adjunct Faculty Organization, or RAFO, and its parent union, the Illinois Education Association, have consistently supported me in fighting this violation of academic freedom. The union filed a formal grievance of my termination based upon a clause in our contract that protects the academic freedom of adjunct faculty. RAFO's executive council members have risked their own faculty positions to fight for the rights of all faculty and students at Roosevelt. They have been extraordinarily patient and have given Roosevelt every opportunity to resolve this case.

Roosevelt's response has been a succession of disingenuous delaying tactics. At one point, the provost rejected a union

grievance, in part because "the grievance is simply an attempt by the union to overturn the university's decision." Roosevelt has offered multiple cover stories to try to shift the argument away from the academic freedom violation. Their cover stories are clearly manufactured, self-contradictory, and at times laughable in how obviously false they are. Roosevelt has continually refused to consider our evidence, speak with our witnesses, negotiate in good faith, or provide requested information. Plus, they have conducted themselves in such a manner that RAFO has filed two additional grievances over new contract violations.

Throughout, Roosevelt has never once denied that Weininger made the statements and has even defended her statements. Roosevelt has declared that "as chair of the department, Weininger had a right to express her views." It characterized her comments disparaging Palestinians as an "academic discussion" in which she was "defending her position passionately"... compared to the "heated" discussion over whether to place a comma before the "and" in a series.

In response to the academic freedom provision in our contract, the basis of our grievance, Roosevelt has declared that it is within the university's province, not the professors', to determine curriculum. Roosevelt states that what topics are covered in class and whether students are allowed to ask questions in class are not academic issues but pedagogical issues. Therefore, issues of the content and conduct of a course are not covered under the provisions of academic freedom. What Roosevelt is attempting to do is use my case to change the playing field between itself and the union. It is about control of contingent faculty. Roosevelt is attempting to create an environment in which anything they want to control can be declared a pedagogical issue and thus exempted from academic freedom protections.

We currently are scheduled for arbitration on the first grievance in October and are awaiting scheduling of arbitration for the two other grievances.

Everyone hearing my story is naturally shocked and appalled. How could she say those things and how could the university defend her, they ask. However, most people then just wish me well and say they look forward to hearing what happens. With respect, that response, though well intentioned, is naïve; perhaps the same naïveté I would have shown a year ago. Sadly, there is evidence suggesting that my situation is NOT an isolated incident but a sign of things to come. Violations of academic freedom are becoming means to ensure a "patriotic correctness" in today's USA. They also are becoming, I have heard, a means of eliminating labor activists and other "undesirables" among contingent faculty.

The central ideal of academic freedom is clear, though attacks on academic freedom can have murky and complicated origins and motives. There are religious, political, and corporate motives to control speech and content in academia. There are forces within colleges that are willing to collaborate with external interests and also have their own motives to control classroom speech. In the developing economic model of corporatized education, professors are decreasingly seen as mentors who educate and increasingly seen as cogs in the machine that churns out graduates. College administrators increasingly view their institutions as factories, mere economic engines. Just as factory owners desire their machines to perform predictably, so do college administrators desire their faculty to behave as predictable machines.

Similarly, they desire their students to be docile predictable consumers. An effective means to achieve these ends is to control the terms of dialogue. Thus, professors are NOT supposed to stimulate thought or allow open discussion—they are supposed to deliver only a standardized, commoditized curriculum. We are to teach *only the basic facts*, with those facts, of course, determined not by professors, but by the powers that be.

There are those who want to drag all of us into a future world of "one size fits all" viewpoints, where truth is defined, not by



Douglas Giles (left) and new AAUP President Cary Nelson at COCAL panel on academic freedom.

questioning, but by NOT questioning; where the world is divided into an Us versus a Them whom we do not respect, do not dialogue with, and certainly do not treat like they have a side to voice. What happened to me is our future unless we refuse to let it be. I ask you to defend me, but more importantly, I ask you to defend my ideals. I look at my students, and I see human beings who have a mind, a heart, a soul, and a voice. I was fired for seeing my students as people (and for seeing Muslims as people). I was fired for being a teacher, for doing what I am supposed to do, for what our profession demands that we do. If any professor can be fired for being objective and respectful, than anyone, truly anyone, can be fired.

I urge you all to understand that academic freedom is a concern not just in far off lands and times. It could any day become an issue on your campus. The David Horowitzes of the world will look at what happens at Roosevelt as a sign of what they can get away with elsewhere. If my situation is allowed to stand, ...it will have a chilling effect on faculty everywhere. All faculty, especially contingent faculty, will have to fret over every word said in their classrooms knowing that if anything is upsetting to their superiors, they can be fired. If Roosevelt succeeds, then a precedent will have been set that objectivity, openness, and encouraging students to think for themselves are grounds for dismissal. The message will be clear: deviation from the sanitized commoditized curriculum will lead to dismissal... denying academic freedom can become a means of ensuring compliance from faculty and a means of eliminating anyone at will.

I urge you not just to wish me well and stand and watch. I ask you to take action. Be proactive and work now to defend academic freedom before it is taken away. Winning my case in arbitration is not enough, because if there is not considerable opposition to what Roosevelt is attempting to do, they *will* try again, hoping to have better luck next time. We need to start a movement for academic freedom for all faculty, not just tenured faculty, and for students before we lose what we naïvely take for granted. If there is anything I can do to help you, just ask.

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