

The Middlebury Campus - May 9, 1991 - Opinions

Free speech for whom?

by Richard Cornwall

Editor's Note: The author is a professor of economics.

President Bush, speaking at commencement exercises at the University of Michigan this past Saturday, added his voice to the many reactionary ones smearing, with the old label "P.C.," those who are concerned about sexism, racism and homophobia. Bush said, "We all should be alarmed at the rise of intolerance [i.e. at putting limits on speech] in our land, and by the growing tendency to use intimidation rather than reason in settling disputes [emphasis added]." This echoed the strong protests by white, straight men at the SG A meeting on April 28 discussing our College's harassment rules. These men expressed the desire not to be unknowingly offensive (but simultaneously mocking this expression of good intention by claiming almost paralyzing confusion over whether to refer to "women" or "girls") but claimed they felt seriously impaired in their speech by the threat of having to visit a Dean to discuss their choice of words.

Come off it Mr. Bush and
Mr. Defensive Heterosexual!
Before you try to trivialize the

idea of oppression by claiming victim status, FIND OUT WHAT REAL THREATS ARE! Find out why many here at Middlebury have had no access to the much vaunted Rights of Free Speech for a long time. Such intimidation is not growing, it is just that you used to be able to take it for granted that none of us would talk back and now some of us do.

Three examples: If you are 16 years old and just beginning to realize that you might be lesbian or gay and your parent responds to a general question about homosexuality by saying all queers should be shot, or even more directly, by trying to kill you (no, you in Old Chapel, this is not hyperbole!)—if you are this 16 year old, do you exercise your “rights” to free speech to find out what it means to be lesbian or gay?

If you are an untenured professor and your colleagues make faggot jokes, subtle and clever since this is MIDD, after all, do you exercise free speech to say that the new academic field of lesbian/gay/bisexual studies is of great interest to you? Of course, it is these esteemed, politely homophobic colleagues who will decide whether or not to recommend that you get tenure here.

And for this assistant professor, there is an even more important, insidiously homophobic, group of players in your tenure decision: some of your students. As you walk to the

Chateau for the first meeting of the class, you overhear some students behind you asking, “Why was this class moved to the queer dorm?” You do not respond. No, you put on your well practiced heterosexual airs so that this group will say nice things when they complete those all-important teaching evaluations at the end of the term, because your academic future depends heavily on those evaluations at a place like MIDD.

So Mr. Upham and “fellow-travellers,” wake up. Yes, you have the right to print homophobic (that means HATE-ful) things without any concern of a midnight call by a Dean. But for your own intellectual welfare, you might want to inquire a bit more deeply into your beliefs. Find out why Serge and Bachus were made saints of the early Western Christian Church. Find out how Origen or even St. Ambrose told the story of Sodom. What did Jesus say about homosexuality? In fact, the only unambiguous biblical condemnation of sexual activity between people of the same gender is the Holiness Code of Leviticus. Do you follow all of that Code, forswearing clothing of mixed fabrics, rare meat, etc.? Even if you are so “politically correct” and dogmatic in your own practices, you might be more forgiving toward others who think of themselves as Christians since Acts 15:1-29 describes the first Church Council in Jerusalem in 49 A.D.,

including Saints Peter and Paul, which specifically rejected the requirement for Christians to follow the Code in Leviticus.

The key lesson for us is that institutions and ethics as social identities change. Thus in the last century, tuberculosis was widely considered not only a disease, but also a moral failing. The strong presumption that people with TB were “unnatural and intrinsically evil” [to quote a phrase that randomly runs through my mind] yielded only

slowly to the discovery that, in fact, it is spread by bacteria. Similarly, social presumptions about homosexuality are changing slowly. Mr. Upham, did you talk with the faculty for the Winter Term course dealing with why psychologists changed their views of homosexuality?

Some people at MIDD seem to leave their minds rooted in old Time (circa 1966) magazines thinking that homosexuality is “a second-rate substitute for reality...It deserves no encouragement, ... no fake status as minority martyrdom.” Such folks seem unable to see the difference between the threat they see from the almost totally ineffective rules here on offensive speech and the threats which some women, people of color and affectional minorities still experience at Middlebury.

OK, so we must put the right of free speech above all other libertarian guarantees of access

to civil rights and stop quibbling
over word-choices. Besides,
there is only strong, not
unanimous, evidence by
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psychologists that imposing rules on allowable words has a positive effect on underlying attitudes. If offensive speech is constitutionally protected, then some of us will throw it back. Just, as by 1968, resistance by much of the white mainstream had led many to lose hope that the promise of the Civil Right Acts would be fulfilled and, in response to this “white backlash” in the North, to organize Black Power to keep the pressure on, so the dominance of the same mainstream in the 1980’s has led to the birth in the past year of Queer Nation. Some may want to write home to celebrate that there are some pretty QUEER professors at Middlebury college.