

College policy protects discussion, not hatred

by Kevin Moss

Editor's Note: The author is an instructor in the Russian Department and an advisor to MGLBA

A racist would find Middlebury College's harassment policy particularly extremist in regard to its condemnation of racial slurs; an antisemite would find it extremist in its protection of ethnic and religious groups. In last week's letter to the editor David Upham finds it extremist in regard to speech opposed to homosexuality. The language of the college policy protects all equally: "any form of harassment that insults the dignity of others is not accepted." Blue-eyed people need not fear that they may be victimized with impunity.

Careful reading of the harassment policy shows that it specifically protects discussion of sensitive matters and expression of opinion. Nothing is banned, nothing is prohibited, no one is coerced. The tenants of Roman Catholicism are safe, unless there is one I do not know about that says, "Thou shalt call thy neighbor 'fag' and use insulting and derogatory language." The policy describes a range of types of behavior which may be addressed in a number of ways by the community. There is no threat to the free exchange of ideas.

Thanks, Mr. Upham, by the way, for your idea of the "eye color" analogy: on the one hand being homosexual should be considered no more morally reprehensible than having blue eyes. For some reason, though, no one seems

to object that their first amendment rights are infringed upon because they cannot abuse blue-eyed people. And what are the slurs, derogatory comments and disparaging references to blue-eyed people that one might protect anyway? Why is it everyone keeps using only one example? Could it be that first amendment rights are not really the issue? Could it be that the real issue is intolerance of homosexuality?

Intolerance has a history. The Nazis sought to exterminate Jews, gays, and Gypsies. The ancient Greeks, on the other hand, considered intolerance of homosexuals a barbarian characteristic (Plato, Symposium 182 D). The Roman Catholic position on homosexuality has varied greatly over time (which suggests to me that it might be based on something other than purely religious considerations). Scriptural references to homosexuality are fraught with mistranslation and misinterpretation. And the same texts which condemn homosexuality condemn hypocrisy and exclude the greedy from heaven, yet for some reason hypocrites were not burned at the stake and the greedy are not persecuted; the scriptures are adhered to selectively. If we take, on the other hand, the tradition of the church fathers, there was indeed a vocal minority which censored homosexual acts, but these same church fathers condemned absolutely “lending at interest, sexual intercourse during the menstrual period, jewelry or dyed fabrics, shaving, regular bathing, wearing wigs, serving in the civil government or army, performing manual labor on feast days, eating kosher food, practicing circumcision” (John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality*, 166). Let him who is without sin...

On the side of tolerance, in the high middle ages an openly gay archbishop could appoint his lover bishop, and monks could write homoerotic religious poetry apparently without fear of

censure. Richard Lion Heart, the crusading king and symbol of chivalric idealism, was both Catholic and gay. Only later, when Jews and heretics were also being burned at the stake, did it become dangerous to be gay.

In the Soviet Union dissidents were diagnosed as insane and subjected to treatment in mental institutions. Now, the same dissidents are received as prophets of democracy. Such abuses are worth remembering, though no one now will defend them on scientific grounds. Likewise the classification of homosexuality as a mental disorder should be a subject for discussion. Surely no one with a degree in psychology would defend such a position. It is a "major question," as Mr. Upham points out, though not in psychology, but in the history of psychology. The question we should be asking is not whether or not homosexuality is a mental disorder, but what might lie behind the desire to classify it as such.

I hope this letter contributes
to the free exchange of ideas
and to the continuing process of
education. In many cases a
negative opinion of homosexuality
can be stripped by such a
process of its ostensible justification
to reveal what lies behind it:
naked hatred and intolerance
of difference. The opinions and
ideas we can discuss. It is the
hatred and intolerance that have
no place at Middlebury.