REFLECTIONS ON THE CASE STUDY: JAMES TUTTLE VS. LAKELAND COMMUNITY COLLEGE

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As a Chair of a large academic department that supervises over thirty adjunct faculty members, I have sympathy with all the parties in this case. I have sympathy for administrators trying to maintain academic oversight of many adjunct faculty members who are often just on campus to teach their courses. I have sympathy for adjunct faculty who are under paid and often do the bulk of teaching at the general education level with very little guidance on the mission and values of an institution. As long as their student evaluations do not cause alarm, benign neglect often defines their relationship to a university. The educational context that produced this dilemma is now commonplace in the academy today. After years of “suitable” service what are the reasons this case reached litigation? And if I were in James L. Brown’s shoes, what would I do?

First, I will address some of the reasons for the dilemma. Only having minimal knowledge of the case allows me to speculate and use some educated guesses about the case. The context of a less than adequate traditional academic environment has partially created this case. If James Tuttle had been more integrated into a traditional collegial accountability system, his approach would have been a topic of discussion. This awareness, I hope, could have led to faculty development workshops on teaching. The second reason for the explosion of this case is the fact that we are dealing with the tough issue of religion in the classroom. How do we teach about religious ideas in an increasingly pluralistic society? This is even more difficult if we agree that professors, for the sake of the topic and the phenomenon, actually need to teach religion not just teach about religion. I do not believe there are any similar parallels in the academy. Partisan political views and one-sided gender critiques in the classroom, though often criticized as not “appropriate” by faculty colleagues and offended students, seem to have a free speech and an academic freedom
protective consensus in the academy. But we are far from such a consensus in the academy when it comes to religion. We need to examine all the reasons for this. We need to have more discussions about the implications of this lack of a consensus. The phenomenon of religion needs to be better understood before we reach this consensus. The anti-religious bias in the academy needs to be better understood.

I am not surprised that a course that has been “under the radar” for a while has suddenly become explosive. The pagan challenge of a Catholic Philosopher’s approach to a survey course in Philosophy in this case could easily have been a Catholic student’s criticism of a Sufi Professor in another case. What interests me in this case is not the solution based on the legal protections that are guaranteed in our constitution, though these are important, and in fact they quite rightly become the default way of dealing with these issues because we do not have an established consensus about religion in the academy. I think there is a deeper issue in this case: it is about what it means to teach from a religious perspective in the academy. Again, the constitutional and legal argument has only become the issue because we do not have a consensus about the teaching of religion in the academy.

I would use this controversy at Lakeland Community College as a “teaching moment.” Yes, discuss the legal dimensions of the first amendment. However, this discussion will only beg further questions such as the following. Why was religion so important to the founders so that it received special treatment? What is at stake in our understanding about ourselves as humans when we deal with ultimate questions about our existence, whether we give a traditional religious answer to this issue or a more philosophical answer? I believe these questions are at the heart of what liberal education should be dealing with in our world today. Because we have lost sight of the big human questions in the academy we are not prepared to see a controversy like this on the horizon. I would convene a symposium on the topic of teaching from a religious and a non-religious perspective. I would invite a wide range of speakers from off campus to help energize a crucial on-campus discussion. I would do it now at Lakeland. I would recommend that colleges and universities sponsor preemptive symposia on this topic very soon. If we do not do so, we will all have a version of the Lakeland controversy on our own campus, if not this year then for sure in the next couple of years.

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