

2017 YEAR IN REVIEW: ROLLINS COLLEGE

The following articles appeared in the 2017 May issue of Catalyst.

ROLLINS COLLEGE YIELDS; RELIGIOUS LIBERTY PREVAILS

The administration and the Board of Trustees of Rollins College, a liberal arts institution outside Orlando, Florida, recently stood by a professor who violated the religious liberty and free speech rights of one of her students. In a showdown with the Catholic League, it yielded within a week, and reinstated the suspended student.

This was a big victory, but it should never have gotten to the point that it did. An intolerant Muslim professor tried to run roughshod over an innocent Christian student and almost got away with it. The details of this story can be found on pp. 4-5.

It started when we learned that a Christian student confronted his Muslim professor about her contention that Jesus was not crucified. She further said his apostles did not believe he was divine. That is the Islamic interpretation. When the student challenged her, she got vindictive, failing him for “disrupting” her class.

This was just the beginning. Bill Donohue wrote a letter to the college president, Dr. Grant H. Cornwell (see p. 4) outlining his concerns. He called Donohue to defend himself, getting defensive and contentious. Donohue peppered him with questions, which he could not answer.

Then the media got involved, both locally and nationally. This was followed by a couple of emails sent by Allan E. Keen, chairman of the Board of Trustees. He proved to be just as

evasive as Cornwell.

We didn't back down. Donohue issued a pointed refutation of Keen's argument, citing a news story in the *Orlando Sentinel*. He was told that the student wasn't suspended for any altercation he had with his professor, but for making threats. Threats against whom? Donohue wanted to know.

The professor then accused the student of stalking her. Next, she contacted the public safety office about him. But when pressured to be specific—citing evidence of a threat—no one involved was able to do so.

Finally, after being pounded by critics, and beaten up in the press, Rollins decided to reinstate the student.

The *Orlando Sentinel* quoted what the president had to say about it. "Cornwell said he, the trustees and deans had received 10,000 emails," most of which he said were "filled with hate."

We have no pity on anyone who defends an indefensible assault on someone's religious liberties and free speech rights, and is then called out for it. Those emails, we are proud to say, were a direct response to our plea: we listed Cornwell's email address on our news releases, asking everyone to contact him. Our side exploded and the administration backed off. Justice was done. Hallelujah!

ROLLINS COLLEGE PUNISHES FREE SPEECH

The following is the text of a letter sent by Bill Donohue to Rollins College president Grant H. Cornwell regarding a violation of a student's rights on his campus.

I am requesting your intervention in a serious matter that has arisen on your campus involving the abridgement of free speech. My interests are twofold: (a) as president of the

nation's largest Catholic civil rights organization, I take issues of religious discrimination seriously, and (b) I served on the board of directors of the National Association of Scholars for 20 years, during which time I was a college professor.

From news reports that I have read, a sophomore at Rollins, Marshall Polston, was suspended for allegedly creating a "threat of disruption within the operations of the College," and for jeopardizing "the safety and well-being of members of the College community and yourself."

Those are strong charges. Yet the incident that gave rise to this incendiary situation was apparently a classroom disagreement that Mr. Polston had with professor Areej Zufari. She asserted that the Biblical story of the crucifixion was not true, and that Jesus' apostles did not believe he was divine.

Professor Zufari is entitled to her belief, and so is Mr. Polston. What she is not entitled to do is punish him for disagreeing with her: he is a straight-A student and she failed him for his "disruption." Worse, college officials have now deemed him to be a threat to campus safety. This is absurd, outrageous, and indefensible.

You have served as a Director of the Association of American Colleges and Universities, and previously served on the National Advisory Board for Liberal Education and Global Citizenship. You therefore know the value of free speech and the unfettered right to pursue truth. That is why I am asking you to intervene in this matter.

Thank you for your consideration.

DONOHUE REPLIES TO ROLLINS TRUSTEE

The day after Bill Donohue spoke to the student, Marshall Polston, and the president of Rollins, Dr. Grant H. Cornwell, we received an email from Allan E. Keen, chairman of the Board of Trustees. Bill Donohue offered the following pointed rejoinder to Keen; he also commented on a news story in the *Orlando Sentinel* by Gabrielle Russon. The italics are Donohue's response to cited remarks.

- In his email, Keen said Polston "was suspended because of a matter related to another student." *No details were given.*
- In his letter to the Trustees, Keen contended this issue was not a recent development, saying that "there were actions and concerns going back for several months, and even after some intervention, the student continued to act somewhat unusual..." *No details were given.*
- Keen said the student was not suspended for his "disagreements with the professor, or these classroom activities." Rather, "it was related to a 'different' incident with a student." *No details were given.*
- In her story in the *Orlando Sentinel*, Russon said the professor "filed a 'protection against stalking' request" against the student last Friday. Rollins then suspended him. *No one questioned the filing or the injunction. But was there evidence that he actually stalked her? Or did she file the complaint believing he might stalk her?*
- The injunction, Russon said, listed the nature of the professor's problems with the student. "He has disrupted class twice (we've only had two classes) with antagonizing interjections, contradicting me and monopolizing class time." *As a former professor, this complaint read as an indictment of the professor, not the student. "Antagonizing interjections"? Meaning he sharply disagreed? More important, since when has it been regarded as inappropriate student behavior to "contradict" a professor? Why isn't this simply a matter*

of free speech? Similarly, did he not allow other students to speak—did he filibuster?—or was he overly talkative?

- Russon said of the professor, “She wanted him out of her class.” *Precisely—this says it all.*
- Russon wrote that “School officials intervened to meet with Polston and his behavior improved over the next few weeks.” *But what exactly did he do wrong to merit this intervention? Did he violate campus policy in some way? And how did his “behavior” change? Or was the intervention meant to have a chilling effect on his free speech? If so, this is a very serious matter.*
- The professor failed Polston (a straight-A student) for an essay he submitted on March 8. Russon said the professor “was concerned about his reaction” and wrote to a public safety official about it. “The next day, Polston emailed her.” He accused her of “extreme bias.” *In other words, the professor contacted the public safety office **in anticipation of a threat, one that never happened!***
- Russon quoted an associate dean saying, “At no point did he threaten anyone openly.” *This seals it: Her complaint to the public safety office was not based on any threat by the student.*
- Russon wrote, “Zufari was so concerned that she canceled class.” *About a non-existent threat? This is posturing, a gambit designed to indict the student on charges that are false, by her own admission.*

ROLLINS COLLEGE REINSTATES STUDENT

“There is more free speech in pubs than on the typical college campus.” That is what Bill Donohue told Rollins College president Grant Cornwell on March 28, the day he first addressed the suspension of student Marshall Polston. Rollins has now reinstated the student.

This issue may be over for Polston—he courageously stood up to those who sought to abridge his freedom of speech—but it should not be over for the professor, Areej Zufari, or the administration. There are too many serious issues left unaddressed.

When Donohue spoke to Cornwell, he said Polston was not being suspended for anything he did in the classroom, but for his threats. He asked if he carried a gun. He said no. He asked if he carried a knife. He said no. He asked if he verbally threatened Zufari. He said no. “Then who did he threaten?” He said he was told by lawyers not to divulge who it was.

Cornwell also told Donohue that the entire story was nothing more than “fake news.” He said he was “calling me [Donohue] out” on this. That was a mistake. Donohue responded by saying, “I am calling you [Cornwell] out,” and then proceeded to tell him how badly he was handling this matter.

If Donohue were the president of Rollins, he told Cornwell, and he had evidence that a student was threatening someone, Donohue would call the police. But he didn’t. Similarly, Donohue said, if he were in his shoes, and he was convinced that this story was “fake news,” he would hold a press conference and offer evidence to support his claim. But he didn’t.

We now know why Cornwell didn’t call the cops or hold a presser: there was no evidence that Polston had done anything wrong.

Zufari is the issue, not Polston. She does not belong teaching in any college or university in America. Her contempt for the free speech rights of her students is appalling, and her vindictiveness is obscene. It’s actually worse than this.

Zufari called the public safety office to lodge a complaint against Polston. On what basis? No one, not Cornwell or Zufari, has claimed that Polston threatened her. So why didn’t

the administration put her on the carpet? After all, a student's reputation was damaged and nothing was done about it. Zufari also accused Polston of "stalking her." But there is no evidence that he did.

By reinstating Polston, it suggests there never was any stalking, or threats against anyone.

The administration is also the issue. Why was the administration so upset with Polston for arguing with Zufari in the classroom that it intervened to change his behavior, but it did not intervene when a Muslim student recommended beheading gays and adulterers? Why did Zufari treat this comment as if it were uncontroversial? We would love to know why.

Why did the administration not question the propriety of Zufari telling her students that Jesus was not crucified, and that his apostles did not believe he was divine? Would the administration be okay with a Christian professor for proselytizing in the classroom?

The *Orlando Sentinel* story in the March 31 newspaper ended by saying, "Students and Rollins employees held a private meeting on diversity Thursday to discuss what happened."

Diversity on college campuses never means diversity of thought—the most important diversity a college should foster—it means demographic diversity. If Rollins were serious about making real reforms, it would not be talking about the diversity that a Muslim professor brings to the campus; rather, it would be talking about the right of students to question their professors.

The case against Polston was ideologically charged from the beginning. Zufari violated every tenet of academic freedom, and the administration engaged in a cover up on her behalf, sundering the rights of an innocent student in the process. There is nothing "fake" about that account.