

INSTITUTIONS OF “HIGHER” EDUCATION?

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Colleges and universities are called institutions of higher education, but it makes one wonder these days whether the appellation is warranted. Take the response we got from the University of Virginia and the University of Minnesota about their sponsorship of anti-Catholic fare.

The anti-Catholic graphics that appeared in the student newspaper at the University of Virginia garnered much publicity, thanks to the Catholic League. We were able to show that when gays were offended by the newspaper, the editors had no problem offering an apology. But not when it comes to Catholics—we’re treated to a different standard.

When pressed to explain the double standard, editor-in-chief Michael Slaven told the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* that he “draws a distinction between stereotyping people and satirizing ideas that people have in their heads voluntarily. A comic saying ‘all Catholics bomb abortion clinics’ would not be allowed, but a comic that satirizes religious ideas—including these—is allowed.”

So according to Slaven’s reasoning, the vicious attacks on Jesus and Our Blessed Mother do not constitute a negative stereotype. Either that or he doesn’t consider Jesus and Mary to be people. In any event, it’s nice to know that he considers the offensive cartoons to be satire, something which managed to get into people’s heads voluntarily (as opposed, I guess, to getting there involuntarily).

Here’s another gem. *The Roanoke Times* showed its brilliance by issuing an editorial defending Slaven’s logic. “Just because something offends cherished beliefs does not mean it must not

be spoken," it said, "or in this case, drawn." Which would be fine except that neither the *Roanoke Times*, nor most any other newspaper in the United States, had the guts to publish the inoffensive depictions of Muhammad that appeared in the Danish press. Was it the "cherished beliefs" of Muslims that allowed for such sensitivity. Or was it fear?

The editorial not only defended the bigots, it got huffy with us. After noting that Christians have taken offense, it opined that "when they call for censorship and apologies, they forget that the same constitutional amendment that enshrines freedom of religion also establishes freedom of speech and the press." But we never called for censorship. And since gays received an apology when they were offended by the newspaper (for something quite mild compared to the assault on Jesus and the Virgin Mary), why is it that there was no editorial lecturing them? In any case, perhaps the *Roanoke Times* hasn't noticed, but freedom of speech applies equally to those who have been offended. Including Catholics.

Here's another classic. I recently wrote to the president of the University of Minnesota complaining about an upcoming play that slanders Catholicism, and the answer I got was one for the ages. The first three sentences were fine as they directly referenced the specific nature of my complaint. But then it veered off into a form letter, and in the course of doing presented logic that literally imploded under the weight of my objection.

After stating the mundane—the university "hosts hundreds of conferences, concerts, theatre events, lectures and workshops every year"—President Robert H. Bruininks informed me that "The University of Minnesota is committed to establishing and nurturing an environment that actively acknowledges and values a very broad diversity of points of view that are free from racism, sexism, and other forms of prejudice, intolerance or harassment."

Bruininks' response might have made sense if I had complained that not enough orthodox Catholics were being invited to participate in a conference on the "Future of Catholicism." But my complaint spoke to an offensive play. A summary of the play, found on the university's own website, says "it is easy for a rich church to rage against abortion when millions are born into poverty, and become victims of the drug trade, from which people under the Vatican's protection can fill their pockets."

So what are we to make of this? The president boasts that the university does not welcome "prejudice, intolerance [and] harassment," but finds no occasion to slam this virulently anti-Catholic play. The most generous thing that can be said about Bruininks is that he didn't even bother to read what he signed. Either that or he believes that anti-Catholicism is not a form of prejudice.

Stuff like this gets exasperating, especially when it emanates from "higher" education. Fortunately, there are enough honest persons in the media who can see through this nonsense. As long as they continue to do so, the culprits will not escape scot-free. Remember, no matter how powerful the person or the institution is, bad publicity hurts. And trust us to deliver it, when warranted.