

KUSHNER UNWORTHY OF HONORARY DEGREE

Recently we commented on the decision by trustees of the City University of New York (CUNY) not to award playwright Tony Kushner with an honorary degree.

As a general rule, objections to anyone being considered for an honorary degree take on weight only when there are serious reasons for doing so. An honorary degree is a statement from an academic institution that meritorious service should be recognized, but it is also a statement, ineluctably so, about the characterological attributes of the honoree. For example, a gifted orator may properly be denied if what he espouses is hatred.

Tony Kushner is a talented creative artist, but he is also someone who espouses hatred. CUNY trustee Jeffrey S. Wiesenfeld correctly identified Kushner as a man whose relentless assaults on the democratic state of Israel effectively disqualify him from being honored by John Jay College, a CUNY institution. On that account alone, Kushner is not deserving of an honorary degree. But there is more.

When the Terrence McNally play, "Corpus Christi," was performed in New York in 1998, Kushner not only defended this vile work—it portrayed Christ having sex with the 12 apostles—he lashed out at the Catholic League for exercising its First Amendment right to freedom of speech. Never did we call for censorship. All we did was hold a demonstration.

When Matthew Shepard, the homosexual from Wyoming, was mercilessly killed by anti-gay thugs, Kushner blamed the pope! "Pope John Paul II endorses murder," he wrote in the *Nation*.

Kushner's vitriol against Israel, coupled with his Catholic bashing, made him unworthy of receiving a CUNY honorary

degree. It may be that Kushner deserves to be in a Playwright Hall of Fame. But CUNY represents the norms of the academic community, and they do not counsel bigotry. Jeff Wiesenfeld raised the right issues, and made the right call.

Unfortunately, less than a week after our news release, the trustees reversed their initial decision and decided to honor Kushner.