

A Heretic at Duke Divinity School

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May 21, 2017

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May 21, 2017 5:47 pm ET



Photo: David Gothard

The campaign against free speech on American campuses rolls on, steadily decreasing the domain of permissible ideas. But the case of Paul Griffiths, a professor at Duke Divinity School, is something new. The defense of liberty of thought and discussion itself has been transformed into a career-ending transgression.

The case was brought to light in late April when Rod Dreher of the American Conservative published a series of [email exchanges](#). It started Feb. 6, when Anthea Portier-Young, another Divinity School professor, distributed a facultywide email. “On behalf of the Faculty Diversity and Inclusion Standing Committee,” she wrote, “I strongly urge you to participate in the Racial Equity Institute Phase I Training planned for March 4 and 5.” Ms. Portier-Young promised colleagues that the weekend program would be “transformative, powerful, and life-changing.”

Ms. Portier-Young, an Old Testament scholar with expertise in “constructions of identity, gender, and ethnicity, and traditions of violence and nonviolence,” approvingly quoted the Racial Equity Institute’s guiding ideas: “Racism is a fierce, ever-present, challenging force,

one which has structured the thinking, behavior, and actions of individuals and institutions since the beginning of U.S. history.’ ” She also included the institute’s call to political action: “To understand racism and effectively begin dismantling it requires an equally fierce, consistent, and committed effort.’ ”

Late in the afternoon of the same day, Mr. Griffiths replied in a facultywide email. Noting that Ms. Portier-Young had “made her ideological commitments clear,” he stated that he would “do the same, in the interests of free exchange.”

Mr. Griffiths, a professor of Catholic theology, was good to his word. “I exhort you not to attend this training,” he wrote. “There’ll be bromides, clichés, and amen-corner rah-rahs in plenty,” he continued, and it would reflect “illiberal roots and totalitarian tendencies” and be “definitively anti-intellectual.” He noted that “(re)trainings of intellectuals by bureaucrats and apparatchiks have a long and ignoble history.”

He then entreated the faculty to rededicate themselves to their scholarly and pedagogical mission: “Each of us should be tense with the effort of it, thrumming like a tautly triple-woven steel thread with the work of it, consumed by the fire of it, ever eager for more of it.”

That evening, Dean Elaine Heath entered the fray. Announcing in her own facultywide email that she was “looking forward to participating in the REI training” and that she was “proud that we are hosting it at Duke Divinity School,” Ms. Heath—also a professor of missional and pastoral theology—expressed confidence that the sessions would improve the school’s “intellectual strength, spiritual vitality, and moral authority.”

Having sided firmly with Ms. Portier-Young, the dean proceeded to outline rules of acceptable discourse in facultywide email exchanges. “It is inappropriate and unprofessional to use mass emails to make disparaging statements—including arguments *ad hominem*—in order to humiliate or undermine individual colleagues or groups of colleagues with whom we disagree. The use of mass emails to express racism, sexism, and other forms of bigotry is offensive and unacceptable, especially in a Christian institution.”

Yet Mr. Griffiths’s three-paragraph, 228-word email made no disparaging statement about any individual, much less expressed bigotry of any sort. Unless—in accordance with the illiberal spirit that has taken root on our campuses—one equates unsparing criticism of *ideas* with attacks on a *person* and redefines “bigotry” to mean deviation from the progressive party line.

Ms. Heath instigated a disciplinary procedure against Mr. Griffiths for “unprofessional conduct,” and Ms. Portier-Young filed a complaint for “harassment” with the University’s Office for Institutional Equity. Last week Mr. Griffiths announced he was quitting effective at the end of next academic year.

“Harsh and direct disagreement places thought under pressure,” Mr. Griffith wrote last week in an love letter to the university and the life of the mind in Commonweal. “Pressure can be intellectually productive. . . . But pressure also causes pain and fear; and when those under pressure find these things difficult to bear, they’ll sometimes use any means possible to make the pressure and the pain go away. They feel unsafe, threatened, put upon, and so they react by deploying the soft violence of the law or the harder violence of the aggressive and speech-denying protest. Both moves are common enough in our élite universities now, as is their support by the powers that be. Tolerance for intellectual pain is less than it was. So is tolerance for argument.”

At Duke Divinity School, the defense of liberal learning and teaching itself is now beyond toleration.

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