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Real educators teach students how -- not what -- to think

Phyllis Zagano | Sep. 1, 2010 Just Catholic

Last spring, two knock-down, drag-out academic fights made the news. At the University of Illinois, a part-time religion professor lost his job for presenting Catholic teaching on homosexuality. At Catholic Seton Hall University in New Jersey, a tenured political science professor raised hackles for proposing a course on gay marriage.

The end of the story: both are in the classroom this fall, each teaching his heartburn-causing course. The results are a qualified win for academic freedom.

In Illinois, the religion department's "Introduction to Catholicism" included -- and hopefully will continue to include -- Catholic teaching on homosexual relations. The professor in question, Kenneth Howell, followed a class discussion contrasting utilitarianism and Catholicism with an e-mail to students.

Catholic moral teaching, he wrote, follows natural law, which argues that "sexual acts are only appropriate for people who are complementary, not the same."

A student complained to the department chair, saying Howell's words were "downright absurd" and "hate speech." The chair agreed, as did the dean. Howell was fired, then rehired. He has 57 students this semester.

In New Jersey, W. King Mott's political science seminar on "The Politics of Gay Marriage" hit Newark Archbishop John J. Myers' radar.

Myers, chairman of Seton Hall's board, said the course "seeks to promote as legitimate a train of thought that is contrary to what the Church teaches," and is "not in sync with Catholic teaching."

Mott's syllabus -- as approved by a Seton Hall committee -- includes one history of marriage book, and three pro-gay marriage books. That's troublesome, because good political science includes both sides, while this class appears to list to the left. Seton Hall says it's a Catholic university. What's "Catholic" about a gay marriage course?

Hold on. Each course raises important questions about education. Academic freedom must support all topics, but cannot protect bias.

In too many schools "education" has devolved into opinionated polemics on both sides of the desk. Professors push personal agendas. Student "reflection" and "reaction" papers are often mere punditry, not structured arguments.

Both think nothing of calling someone a "buffoon" or an idea "stupid" without benefit of facts or analysis.

This is education?

My chief complaint is the death of objectivity -- or any attempt at objectivity -- in teaching.

The Seton Hall course could be interesting -- gay marriage will surely soon be addressed by the Supreme Court -- but it's only interesting if the professor teaches unbiased legal and political reasoning.

One course book is written by the sponsor of New Jersey's gay marriage act, but none seems to walk the other side of the street. That's not fair to the students.

Back in Illinois, anything could happen.

Teaching religion in secular settings is dicey -- I know, I do it -- because you don't want to give the impression you are trying to indoctrinate students to your way of thinking.

Secular purists can be annoying. I actually have a faculty evaluation complaining that I said I took Communion one day. But, as the president of the American Academy of Religion said about the Howell case, professors don't want to "leave the impression that we are trying to advance or inhibit religion."

Professional educators want to teach students to evaluate and apply facts in intelligent discussion.

It should not matter if Mott is openly gay. Equally, it should not matter that Howell is openly Catholic.

The real test of their professionalism would be if Mott could fairly teach about Catholic morality, and Howell could give all sides of the gay marriage debate.

Real educators don't teach students what to think. Real educators teach students how to think.

[Phyllis Zagano is senior research associate-in-residence at Hofstra University and author of several books in Catholic Studies. This column is provided by Religion News Service.]

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