

# WASHINGTON SQUARE NEWS

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## Opinions: Body Impolitic

# Admin caves on cartoons

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Columnist

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The NYU administration was presented with a perfect chance to defend the integrity of the academic community about which President Sexton gushes so lovingly, and they failed. Last week, the Objectivist Club at NYU held a panel discussion about the cartoons published a few months ago in a prominent Danish daily newspaper and the violent reaction to them in parts of the Muslim world. They were planning to display the cartoons in the background at the discussion, but were in effect barred from doing so by the administration at the request of the NYU Islamic Center.

I received two e-mails the day before the event that shed light on the dishonest and nefarious way students from the Islamic Center dealt with the then-upcoming panel. One was from Islamic Center President Maheen H. Farooqi in which she explained, "We at the Islamic Center are all for discourse and dialogue, and we would encourage the Objectivist Club to partake in whatever discussion they would like."

The other e-mail was from Christopher Bush on behalf of the officers of the Objectivist Club, in which he quoted Bengali Students Association webmaster, Imtiaz Mussa, who said, "The Islamic Center would like everyone to get tickets to this event so we can kill their attendance figures. ... Therefore, I ask you to go to Ticket Central, get two tickets for this event and rip them up."

Farooqi's e-mail tried to explain that the Islamic Center was against only the displaying of the cartoons and not the discussion about them, but the disgraceful ultimatum the Objectivist Club received from the NYU administration suggests that this nuance was not intellectual honesty, but lip service to intellectual honesty. An officer of the Objectivist Club who introduced the event said the ultimatum was this: If the cartoons are displayed, the event can be open only to NYU students, not the public. If the cartoons are not displayed, the event can be open to the public. She explained that to have as many people come to the event as possible, the club chose not to display the cartoons.

Why does this reasoning make sense? This is why: If the club chose to display the cartoons, and have the event open only to NYU students, no one would have been able to attend because the students from the Islamic Center would have sabotaged the attendance like they said they would. Essentially, the Islamic Center intimidated the Objectivist Club into not showing the cartoons. In our academic community, or any other, this is unacceptable. It is thuggery.

I have argued in these pages before that the cartoons were run in European papers, but, for the most part, were not displayed in American papers because European culture disdains religiosity and American culture treasures it. I have noted that our nation leads the world in balancing a vigorous tradition of religious freedom with a vigorous tradition of free speech and free press. One could reasonably argue that this might constitute some kind of censorship — and they might be right, depending on their argument — but I am sure that the U.S. should respect both freedom of speech and freedom of religion simultaneously, and this clearly involves trade-offs.

But NYU is a private university, not a newspaper or a government agency. There are no trade-offs here. It is an enclave, a fortress — a sanctuary of intellectual freedom un beholden to any intellectual hegemony (or should be). If you are a prospective student and you think you will study at this university (or any other for that matter) and not be offended by anything, you've got another thing coming. As Greg Lukianoff, a panelist and the president of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education said, "No one has a right to not be offended."

One question during the q-and-a session asked why there was no panelist defending the Islamic position. The Objectivist Club officer explained that they had asked Islamic campus groups to send speakers and the Islamic groups refused. Someone in the crowd yelled out during the discussion that they refused because the cartoons were to be displayed. The Islamic Center distributed a statement at the event that read: "The display of the Danish cartoons is an incitement to hatred, racial prejudice and irrational fear of Islam."

The cartoons were indeed incitements. Three of them were submitted to Jyllands-Posten by a Muslim cleric who wanted to rile up other Muslims into an anti-Western frenzy, but they were incitements nonetheless. However, the display of the cartoons by the Objectivist Club wasn't an incitement against Muslims any more than the display of Nazi paraphernalia in a Holocaust museum is an incitement against Jews — it is for an educational purpose. The concept that someone can depict someone else's opinions, be they in writing or in artwork, without necessarily endorsing them, is a bedrock concept that may be the simplest and most important intellectual foundation of the idea of a university — and the NYU administration abandoned it.

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