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N.Y.U. bans Danish cartoons' display at campus talk

By Chad Smith

Plans for a presentation at New York University about a Danish newspaper's decision to publish cartoons considered blasphemous veered off course last Wednesday night, when university administrators prohibited students from displaying the cartoons at the heart of the debate. The decision touched off a dispute at the university about the limits of free speech.

"This wasn't just a knee-jerk reaction," said James Devitt, an N.Y.U. spokesperson. "As a university and a community, we have a number of interests to protect and we must try and respect everyone's sensitivities."

N.Y.U.'s chapter of the Objectivist Club sponsored the event, "Free Speech and the Danish Cartoons," at the Kimmel Center and invited two authors, a journalist and an individual-rights spokesperson to speak to students and the public.

Inspired by the philosophies of author Ayn Rand, the Objectivist Club attempts to "reverse the anti-reason, anti-individualism, anti-freedom, anti-capitalist trends in today's culture," according to the Ayn Rand Institute's Web site.

N.Y.U. administrators last Wednesday said that the 13 cartoons, which depict and in some cases deride the prophet Mohammed, an act forbidden in the Muslim religion, could be displayed if the event were restricted to N.Y.U. students. However, if the public and press wanted to attend, the cartoons would be off limits.

"If we would have let everyone in [to the event], you just never know who could be in the audience," said Devitt. "We certainly didn't try and stop the talk, though."

Nevertheless, the decision prompted a backlash from the Ayn Rand Institute.

"N.Y.U. has sacrificed the principle underlying its flourishing and the survival of civilization — free speech," said Dr. Yaron Brook, president of A.R.I.

N.Y.U. administrators began to worry when members of the Islamic Center at N.Y.U, another student association, expressed concerns about the implications of showing the cartoons in a university-sponsored forum. Members at the center wrote to university administrators, voicing frustrations, and then later bought tickets to the Objectivist Club's presentation and ripped them up in public.

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"These cartoons have led to riots, protests, beatings and even deaths on an international level and now they are being displayed at N.Y.U.?" said Maheen Farooqi, president of the Islamic Center, on a Web posting. "You don't have to have images like these to talk about freedom of speech."

Others disagreed.

"N.Y.U. is a university. A university is a place for free and unfettered discussion in the pursuit of knowledge," said Jonathan Leaf, a speaker at Wednesday night's event. Leaf, a former editor at New York Press, resigned from his post at the newspaper after its owners denied the editorial staff the right to reprint the Danish cartoons.

"Broad and open conversation is needed in order for all people to come to an understanding of what the truth is, whether it be about Islam, Mohammed or terrorism," Leaf said. "That is being lost because people are afraid to talk fully and unreservedly."

The controversy erupted about two months ago, when Muslim leaders in Denmark, after months of demanding that the Danish government apologize for the cartoons published in the Danish newspaper Jylland-Posten, brought the cartoons to the attention of Middle Eastern leaders. After those leaders wrote letters to the Danish government, and still didn't receive an acceptable response, they disseminated the cartoons in their countries. So far, over 30 people have been killed in the Middle East in related violence.

Besides its members, the Islamic Center had other supporters who spoke out against the cartoons, including Rabbi Yehudah Sarna of the Bronfman Center, a center for Jewish life at the university.

After the Objectivist Club agreed to comply with administrators' requests not to display the cartoons, members of the Islamic Center agreed to return the remaining tickets they bought. The press and public were also allowed to attend.

The university's handling of the talk has led to an even broader discussion on campus about the cartoons, with students and columnists reacting in the Washington Square News, the university newspaper. On the newspaper's message boards this Tuesday, each side of the argument had its supporters.

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