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Richard A. Zeller: The case of Brown University: A culture of 'contempt and dishonesty'

01:00 AM EST on Monday, November 27, 2006

KENT, Ohio

THE ASSERTION that a group of people constitute a "culture of contempt and dishonesty" is a serious assertion. Such an assertion, whether true or false, drives a stake into the heart of the concept of community. For a community is a culture of respect and honesty. To maintain a community culture of respect and honesty, contempt and dishonesty need to be expelled.

The problem, of course, is determining whether the assertion that members of a group of people constitute a "culture of contempt and dishonesty." In totalitarian states, anyone who takes issue with the tyrant is expelled on this basis regardless of whether the dissident or the tyrant directs the "culture of contempt and dishonesty."

In democratic states, we require that such assertions be supported by evidence and that an independent panel judge whether the evidence is sufficient for such expulsion. The standards of evidence required for such a judgment are stringent because we do not wish that unsubstantiated assertions of contempt and dishonesty prevail.

So let's consider whether Brown University's expulsion of the members of the evangelical Christian fellowship of Trinity Presbyterian Church was totalitarian or democratic. Consider the evidence:

On Sept. 13, 2006, the Rev. Janet Cooper Nelson, director of Brown's Office of the Chaplains and Religious

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Life (OCRL), sent the fellowship's leaders an e-mail explaining that the suspension was brought on by the group's "non-compliance with University policy and procedure." She claimed that Trinity Presbyterian Church, the group's local sponsoring body, "has withdrawn its sponsorship."

Minutes after Cooper Nelson sent that e-mail, however, Trinity Senior Pastor David Sherwood replied that Trinity "has not, in any sense, withdrawn its sponsorship." In fact, Pastor Sherwood said that "the group's leaders and students do a fantastic job of equipping the rising generation of student leaders, and our church community counts it a great privilege to be its sponsoring organization."

Brown's associate Protestant chaplain, the Rev. Allen Callahan, then defended the suspension in an e-mail to Cooper Nelson by saying that the group "had not been a 'recognized student organization' since the fall of last year" because its leader at the time submitted a required form late.

But the fellowship's current director of student ministries, Edward Park, reports that no suspension took place last year, observing that the group retained the right to reserve meeting space throughout the 2005-2006 school year. Park submitted all of the necessary paperwork well before the deadline.

Callahan offered the vague and undocumented accusation that the group "had become possessed of a leadership culture of contempt and dishonesty that has rendered all collegial relations with my office impossible."

In response, the students sent the OCRL a letter on Sept. 28 requesting an explanation of the supposed "culture of contempt and dishonesty."

When OCRL failed to respond to that letter, the students contacted FIRE, the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education.

On Oct. 27, FIRE sent a letter to Brown University President Ruth J. Simmons to inform her that the organization had been suspended without explanation or due process and to ask that she examine the manner in which the OCRL treats student organizations under its purview.

On Nov. 10, Interim Vice President of Campus Life and Student Services Russell Carey replied to FIRE's letter by stating that he was "satisfied that the [OCRL's] action was warranted and that it represented an even-handed application" of that office's policies. Carey also said that he will personally "mediate the matter with the goal of ending the suspension."

For now, the fellowship is suspended without knowing what it did wrong, and its nearly 100 students members

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are unable to meet on campus. Pastor Sherwood of Trinity Presbyterian Church concluded, "It's the students who lose out in this situation. It's hard to imagine that anyone's involvement in this organization could be anything but beneficial and salutary."

These are the facts. A fair reading of this evidence is that Reverend Nelson, Reverend Callahan, and Vice President Carey, not Pastor Sherwood, are making false accusations. They, not the members of the evangelical Christian fellowship of Trinity Presbyterian Church, are guilty of a "culture of contempt and dishonesty."

I now ask: Why has Brown University embraced this culture? Why did Brown abrogate the principles of evidence and academic freedom?

Richard A. Zeller is a professor of sociology at Kent State University.

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