

A Comment on the formal proceedings against Peter March

The Journal, the student newspaper at Saint Mary's, Vol. 72, No. 4, 20 September 2006

Mark Mercer
Department of Philosophy
Saint Mary's University
Halifax, NS B3H 3C3
(902) 420-5825
mark.mercer@smu.ca

Philosophy professor Peter March caused much outrage and hurt among Muslims and others at Saint Mary's University last February when he posted on his office door the notorious twelve cartoons originally published in the Danish journal *Jyllands-Posten*. These cartoons had sparked protests and, in some Muslim nations, even riots. Many people contend that one or another them insults Islam or Muslims or Muhammad.

In late March, upset students at Saint Mary's filed a formal complaint against Dr March. A Harassment and Discrimination Hearing Committee was struck to determine whether Dr March had harassed the complainants, either by posting the cartoons or in things he said or did in the days following. The matter has not yet been settled. If the Committee determines that he did harass the students, Dr March might in the end be reprimanded by the university.

No doubt the students were hurt and upset. But should they have brought this complaint? No, they should not have done so. No one should have sought to have Dr March officially sanctioned for his gesture or for anything he said or did following it, no matter how hurt or upset they were. Bringing a formal complaint against Dr March is entirely contrary to the life and ideals of a university.

I say this without proposing that the cartoons are less bad than the complainants think they are. Let us suppose that the cartoons are indeed deeply offensive and that Muslims at Saint Mary's were right to feel insulted either by Dr March's gesture or by what he said in defending his posting of them. Still, no one should have filed a formal complaint against him.

A liberal arts university, the sort of university Saint Mary's aspires to be, is a place devoted to the life of the mind. Our passion here is to understand and appreciate the world—and to seek to reform the world in light of that understanding and appreciation. As intellectuals, we desire to be free to think and to say whatever we want to whomever we want, and to listen to whatever or to whomever we want. We want to be able to see for ourselves what is true and what is right. Crucially, we want to live in light of the true or the right *because* it is the true or the right, and not because an authority requires that we do. That is one of our core characteristics. Now some ideas or manners of presenting them are disturbing or offensive, of course, but in living the life of the mind we want them discredited and abandoned, not suppressed. To bring suit against a person for expressing ideas, or even for advocating them, is, though, to ask an authority to rule those ideas out of bounds and, thereby, to suppress them. And that is to seek to deny us our ability to judge things for ourselves and to reject what is rotten on our own grounds.

No one who cares for the life or ideals of a liberal arts university, then, could properly seek to have Dr March silenced or punished for posting offensive cartoons or making offensive remarks.

Those offended by Dr March's gesture, and those who sympathize with those offended, are

entirely right to express their feelings however they see fit—so long as they seek neither to silence nor to punish others. They can and should march or speak out or post cartoons of their own. Of course, to the degree to which they live the life of the mind, they will be concerned to explain in what the offensiveness of the cartoons consists and to justify their contention that Dr March ought not have posted the cartoons or said what he did. To criticise, with arguments, and with concern for objections to one’s arguments, is just what it is to live the life of the university.

The students who initiated proceedings against Dr March, since they have chosen to be university students, aspire to live the life of the mind. But they are novices in that life, and they do not fully understand its nature or rigours. They are rookies, and we expect them to make rookie mistakes. Students need to be guided into the life of the mind by those already well acquainted with it. One sad fact of the Peter March affair at Saint Mary’s University is that students seeking to become intellectuals received very little sound guidance from their professors or the university’s administrators. Professors and administrators should have shown them how to respond properly, as competent and committed intellectuals, to insults and to offensive ideas. When the students first conceived the project to proceed formally against Dr March, professors close to these students, or the Dean of Arts, or the Vice President Academic, or, after the others had failed, the President himself, should have sat down with them and calmly explained how what they were contemplating was entirely inconsistent with their own aspirations to be intellectuals and to live the life of the mind. But no university veterans sat down with them. They were terribly ill served by our institution’s leaders.

“Is nothing more important to you than the life of the mind?” I hear my critic asking. “Is a person not to be silenced or sanctioned no matter how much harm their actions cause?”

I can imagine cases, even at a university, in which it’s better, all things considered, to silence or to sanction than not to, though I have to strain to do so. Such cases must clearly and directly put life or limb or property at risk, and silencing or sanctioning must be the only effective counter-measure available. Certainly posting cartoons on a door is no such case. Nor would disparaging a religion, its practitioners, or its founder, no matter how savagely, count as such a case.

I’ve assumed, for the sake of argument, that Dr March’s gesture was in fact offensive and insulting and that people were right to be hurt by it and angry over it. I’ve shown, I believe, that even if Dr March’s gesture was an abuse of free speech, still, no one should have sought to punish him for it. But was his gesture *actually* offensive or insulting? No, it wasn’t, not at least so far as I can see. None of the cartoons counts as other than fair editorial comment on world events or culture or politics, no matter how wrong-headed one might find that comment to be. But perhaps I am mistaken about this. Maybe those hurt by Dr March’s actions were right to be hurt by them.

In any case, no one hurt or upset by Dr March’s gesture has yet explained to me *how* they were right to be hurt or upset by it. Perhaps to begin to repair the damage to their development as intellectuals, and to begin to repair the damage to Saint Mary’s, the students who filed the complaint of harassment against Dr March could explain—fully, with argument, and with concern for objections—just how Dr March’s behaviour was obnoxious, abusive, or otherwise vile. How did posting the cartoons, or speaking against Islam or Muslims or Muhammad, if that is what Dr March did, harass anyone? To attempt to explain these things publicly would be to return to living the life of the mind.