

Freedom of expression at Saint Mary's

The Cranky Professor

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Professors and students who've arrived at Saint Mary's only in the past two years or so might assume that they are free to express their opinions and feelings on campus as they wish. Their assumption, though reasonable, is false.

At Saint Mary's, we express ourselves without interference only at the pleasure of Terry Murphy, the Academic Vice-President. If Dr Murphy is offended by your act of expression, or if he judges it contrary to Saint Mary's interests, you will be ordered to cease and desist, and you might be officially reprimanded or otherwise punished. Colin Dodds, the president of Saint Mary's, will countermand Dr Murphy's order only if he disagrees with Dr Murphy that your act of expression is offensive or contrary to Saint Mary's interests; he won't do so on principle, for Dr Dodds accepts that the peaceful expression of opinion and emotion on our campus needs to be overseen and controlled. The views of Dr Murphy and Dr Dodds on expression are, for the most part, shared by the Faculty Union, by faculty members, and by students.

All this became clear in February 2006, when Dr Murphy ordered philosophy professor Peter March to remove from his office door twelve cartoons. Most of these cartoons, originally published in the Danish magazine *Jyllands-Posten*, feature the prophet Mohammed. Some members of the Saint Mary's community were offended by the cartoons—or, at least, by a few of them—as they judged them to embody false and pernicious stereotypes of Arabs and Muslims. Many other members of our community, though not themselves offended by the cartoons, were offended by Dr March's act of posting them. Being offended, they demanded that Dr March take them down.

Indeed, they demanded that the university take them down, and Terry Murphy was happy to comply.

Though Dr Murphy mentioned concern for public safety in his brief memo on his actions, he also sought to justify his censorship by mentioning the offence and hurt the posting caused. Colin Dodds reiterated the latter justification. The Faculty Union decided not to intervene on Dr March's behalf, and Steven Smith, the president of the union at the time, later wrote an editorial informing us that faculty members cannot expect the union's help should they speak irresponsibly. Now some faculty members were appalled by the actions or words of Drs Murphy, Dodds, and Smith; most, though, weren't. Some students also were appalled, but, again, many were not. Indeed, the president of the Saint Mary's Students' Association, Zach Churchill, a popular student politician possessed of strong illiberal views, was thrilled by the university's actions.

The administration continued to manifest its contempt for freedom of expression when it condoned and assisted a group of students who brought a formal complaint against Dr March. As this expensive, authoritarian, and ultimately pointless formal process ground on and on, Dr March posted the cartoons again. Dr Murphy promptly removed them, this time not even bothering with the charade of a public safety justification.

According to Dr Murphy, his attack on freedom of expression had no implications for academic freedom. While we are not free to express ourselves in the corridors of the university, he explained, we should rest assured that we are still free to express ourselves in the classrooms. This would be only small solace if true—yet, as Mr Churchill and others were eager to point out, it cannot be true. If expression outside the classroom can be suppressed and sanctioned on grounds of the hurt it causes, so, too, can expression within it.

Now it is possible that people were right to be offended by the cartoons or by Peter March's posting of them. Still, if we are not free on campus to express what the Academic Vice-President wouldn't have us express, we do not enjoy freedom of expression.

In the one other incident of which I'm aware in which members of the university community were strongly offended by an act of expression, the inclusion of Black Santa Coffee Pot in an exhibition at the Saint Mary's Art Gallery, Terry Murphy, happily, did not act badly—though he didn't do anything commendable, either. In the case of Black Santa, though, there was little pressure on the university to remove the offending piece of art. The people offended by Black Santa, unlike the people offended by the cartoons, were for the most part keen not to violate freedom of expression.

Dr Murphy has not to date acknowledged that he mishandled the Peter March affair, nor has he given the Saint Mary's community any reason to think he has reformed his commitments and would now defend freedom of expression. That is how things presently stand with regard to expression at Saint Mary's University.