

In academia, Islam remains controversial

Omar Sacirbey Religion News Service | Jan. 11, 2012



Men pray during an open house at the Islamic Center of Long Island in Westbury, N.Y., in 2010. (CNS photo/Gregory A. Shemitz)

A recent spate of campus controversies involving professors who made provocative statements about Muslims shows one of two things: a decreasing tolerance for inflammatory speech, or how easy it is for academics to get into trouble.

Or, perhaps, a little bit of both.

The incidents have forced university leaders into the uncomfortable role of deciding the line between protecting free speech and confronting bigotry. Caught in the middle are professors who say their hostility or sympathy toward Islam often results in intimidation or silence.

Last month, Harvard faculty canceled two summer courses taught by Subramanian Swamy, an Indian political leader, over his newspaper column last July that advocated demolishing some 300 Indian mosques, requiring Indian Muslims to prove Hindu ancestry to be allowed to vote, and prohibiting conversions from Hinduism.

The article sparked student protests, and while a Harvard spokeswoman called his remarks "distressing," the school took no formal action.

But when Harvard professors met Dec. 6 to approve the 2012 summer course catalogue, comparative religions professor Diana Eck moved to strike Swamy's classes. Faculty approved the proposal, effectively putting Swamy out of his summer job.

Swamy, who in interviews denied his comments were hateful, has supporters, including free speech advocates who argue that no matter how repugnant his views may be, he's entitled to them, especially at a university where free speech is essential.

Eck said she wasn't disputing Swamy's right to free speech, but rather whether Harvard should employ a teacher who advocates violence and bigotry.

"I don't think it is appropriate for an employee of the university, charged with teaching our students, to openly

advocate the suspension of the human rights of millions of Indian citizens," said Eck, who is an India scholar and director of Harvard's Pluralism Project.

Mujeeb Khan, a doctoral candidate at the University of California-Berkeley who has written about anti-Muslim hate speech in academia, agreed.

"You have a right to say bigoted things, but you don't have a right to expect people to employ you," Khan said.

The Washington-based American Association of University Professors argues in its statement on freedom of expression that no idea or statement can be deemed so hateful as to warrant banning.

"An institution of higher learning fails to fulfill its mission if it asserts the power to proscribe ideas -- and racial or ethnic slurs, sexist epithets, or homophobic insults almost always express ideas, however repugnant," the 1994 statement says.

AAUP is against university administrators punishing professors, but does condone professors taking action against peers, as the Harvard faculty did with Swamy.

The Harvard controversy follows a similar one in November at Tarrant County College in Fort Worth, Texas, where adjunct professor Paul Derengowski was forced to resign from his world religions class because his Christian Apologetics Project website lists Islam as a cult. Two Muslim students complained that he was biased against Islam.

Also in November, students at Purdue University-Calumet in Hammond, Ind., launched protests demanding that the school fire political science professor Maurice Eisenstein, who was accused of writing hateful comments about Muslims on his Facebook page.

Critics, like Campus Watch in Philadelphia, which monitors university curriculums, assert that academia has a liberal bias that is both pro-Muslim and anti-Christian and anti-Jewish.

"The Middle East studies professorate is almost monolithically leftist due to a systematic exclusion of those with conservative or even moderately liberal views," the group says on its website.

In a post-9/11 era, few inflammatory comments go unnoticed. New York University students protested after professor Tunku Varadarajan, writing in Forbes magazine after the 2009 Fort Hood massacre, asked whether "going Muslim" is the new version of "going postal."

To be sure, other topics have landed professors in hot water. Marc Ellis is fighting his dismissal as director of Baylor University's Center for Jewish Studies. He claims his dismissal was orchestrated by Baylor President Kenneth Starr -- the former independent counsel who investigated Bill Clinton -- because Starr didn't like his criticisms of Israel.

But some say the problem of anti-Muslim bias has been particularly pronounced at Harvard. In 2010, Harvard established a \$650,000 research fund named for Martin Peretz, the longtime editor of The New Republic, even after he wrote in a blog that "Muslim life is cheap."

At the time, the university said "it is central to the mission of a university to protect and affirm free speech, including the rights of Dr. Peretz, as well as those who disagree with him, to express their views."

Khan didn't think Peretz's comments were inflammatory enough to merit punishment, but he didn't think they deserved accolades either.

"There is a problem at Harvard," Khan said. "Harvard has been too indulgent of this kind of anti-Muslim bigotry and hate speech, which I don't think they would have tolerated had it been directed at any other group."

Akbar Ahmed, an Islamic studies professor at American University, and Lawrence Rosen, an anthropologist at Princeton, argued last year that universities have an "obligation to counter anti-Muslim sentiment."

"Not since the great era of civil-rights awareness in the 1960s," they wrote in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, "has there been such a compelling need for involvement by the academic community on behalf of a minority population."

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