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Truth and Consequences

by Matt Kaufman

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OK, I know lots of people find philosophy boring; me, I've long found it fascinating. I have fond memories of several classes on the subject, and the wonderful mental stimulation I got from stretching my mind to understand how various people have made sense of the world. Naturally, I disagreed with many of them (as they disagreed with each other), but I felt I was really pushing my mind to become what God made it to be — to truly come *alive*. It was exhilarating.

It was also a little scary. Though I thought of myself as a Christian, I wasn't especially well grounded in an intellectual (or spiritual) understanding of the faith. Today I know that Christianity holds up well intellectually against any notion man can devise. Back then, however, I sometimes had the nervous sense that, if I wasn't careful, some philosophical wind could come along to rip me from what tenuous Christian moorings I had and blow me off to who-knows-where.

That's where Professor Wengert came in. It's been 20 years since I took a couple of his classes, but I still remember how lively, enthusiastic and engaging he was. More than that, I remember how he presented the works of Christian thinkers with a compelling power that helped wipe out my uneasy sense that believers should have some sort of philosophical inferiority complex. Though there was nothing slanted about his approach to describing different philosophies, he clearly *appreciated* Christian thought — so much that I always suspected he was a Christian himself.

So it was with special interest that I read the tale of James Tuttle, a philosophy professor who teaches at Lakeland Community College near Cleveland, Ohio — or did, until a few months ago.

Tuttle is a lot like Wengert — lively, enthusiastic, engaging — and similarly popular with his own students. (In three years-plus of teaching, about 100 students have lavished praise on him in their evaluations.) Tuttle is also Catholic, and says so in his classes. That didn't go down with one of his students last spring, who called herself a "pagan." So she did what progressives in academia have been taught to do lo these many years: She complained to the dean, James L. Brown, claiming that Tuttle had "looked distastefully" at her upon discovering her paganhood, and urging that he be subjected to "counseling for tolerance."

Yet, given the fact that we can't answer questions about ultimate reality (metaphysics), the nature of human knowledge (epistemology) or a life well lived (ethics) without answering questions about the existence and nature of God, there's no denying that the most important questions philosophy has always asked are, fundamentally, *religious* ones.

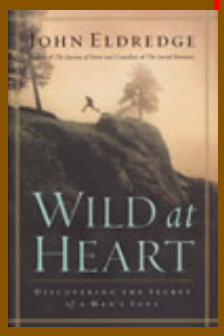
I'm not sure just how you respond to the charge of giving a "distasteful look;" for that matter, I don't know of anyplace outside academia where that sort of complaint would be taken seriously. Still, Brown took it seriously and let Tuttle know it.

Tuttle wasn't completely surprised; he'd been in academia long enough to know how things work. But his response was unconventional; he felt the best way to defuse tensions was not to hide his views, but to be honest about them from the start.

Thus, Tuttle had been offering disclaimers in his class syllabi for over a year, which he'd also read aloud on the first day of his classes. Far from seeking to intimidate students, he went about his confession with good-natured civility. He said he was "a committed Catholic Christian philosopher and theologian," as well as "passionate, controversial (not politically correct), candid, and zany/earthy." But far from insisting students agree with him, he eagerly welcomed discussion and debate on a wide range of ideas, likening the exchange to a friendly tennis match, with "no hitting each other over the head." Finally, he invited any students who were uncomfortable to visit him outside of class, away from the pressure of an audience.

Fair enough, right? Not to Dean Brown, who found Tuttle's disclaimers an "unnerving" display of "arrogance." He suggested Tuttle was unfit to teach outside a "sectarian" classroom and reduced him to teaching a single class for the fall semester, thus slashing his paycheck, and told him the fall semester might be his last.

The man who's secure in his own beliefs doesn't feel the need to caricature anyone else's. He can present them at their strongest.



A few months later, Tuttle was stripped of his ethics class and, long after the other professors in the department had received their assignments, Tuttle found himself still waiting for word. Only after word that he'd gotten legal representation reached the administration was Tuttle finally offered an assigment (teaching Logic) — and that was one he had no interest in teaching. Tuttle turned down the offer; it was time to fight back.

Fortunately, the people he got to help him are very good at this sort of fight.

Tuttle's legal help is the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), an academic-freedom group which took the issue to Lakeland president Morris Beverage. Though Beverage has yet to respond, FIRE's attorneys have a strong track record, which they've earned less through legal action than through education and publicity: By publicly exposing the hypocrisy of schools that claim

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to revere the free exchange of ideas, they frequently get the schools to back down without ever stepping into a courtroom. Shame, at times, still can be a powerful weapon.

I really hope this is one of those times, because in banning a professor who won't hide his faith, Lakeland is violating not just academic freedom but longstanding tradition. As FIRE attorney Greg Lukianoff told Beverage, "Religious beliefs have always been strongly linked with philosophical theories." Citing a host of famous names who held that philosophy and religion couldn't be separated — Plato, Lao Tzu, Maimonides, Thomas Aquinas, Bishop George Berkeley — Lukianoff wondered, "Which of these thinkers would Dean Brown punish for intellectual honesty at Lakeland College?"

The connection between religion and philosophy is no accident. To some people, the whole point of philosophy is to have an alternative to any existing religion — some way to try to make sense out of life without letting God into the picture. Yet, given the fact that we can't answer questions about ultimate reality (metaphysics), the nature of human knowledge (epistemology) or a life well lived (ethics) without answering questions about the existence and nature of God, there's no denying that the most important questions philosophy has always asked are, fundamentally, *religious* ones.

Matt Kaufman is former editor of *Boundless*.

Anyone who cares about those questions enough to extensively study them for years on end — much less teach them — is bound to develop strong ideas about the answers. Indeed, he wouldn't be much of a thinker if he didn't. That doesn't mean he can't present other ideas fairly; in fact, the more he's thought through his own convictions, the better he's equipped to understand those of others. The man who's secure in his own beliefs doesn't feel the need to caricature anyone else's. He can present them at their strongest.

If there's no room for honest men and women of faith in the philosophy classroom — if they have to pretend to be forever wrestling with questions of truth while never resolving them — then those classrooms are going to be pretty impoverished. One of them will be richer if and when James Tuttle returns to it.

All this reminds me: I really need to look up Professor Wengert. I'm 20 years overdue to say thanks.

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