

Was Marquette Professor Disciplined for Upholding Church Teachings?

by Brian Fraga

MILWAUKEE — Marquette University professor John McAdams' political-science courses have been eliminated from the upcoming spring semester, and he is not allowed to be on campus. The matter has attracted national interest, with critics of the Catholic university contending that McAdams is being punished for his willingness to uphold Church teachings about the definition of marriage. McAdams believes the Wisconsin-based Jesuit university has "suspended" him for criticizing a Marquette ethics professor who told a student earlier this year that his position against same-sex "marriage" could be considered offensive to homosexuals in her class.

On Nov. 9, McAdams critiqued the ethics professor on his blog, which led to a firestorm of controversy and media coverage. The university has since notified McAdams that his conduct is being reviewed in light of the university's anti-harassment policy. McAdams told the Register that the university's action violates its own faculty statutes. Marquette, McAdams added, has "shown itself to be timid, overly bureaucratic and lacking any commitment to either its Catholic mission or free expression. Religious universities tend to assimilate into the broader, secular academic culture, and Marquette is no different."

The ethics professor, Cheryl Abbate, who is actually a Ph.D. student-teacher, disputes McAdams' portrayal of the incident and says he falsely attributed her as saying, "Everyone agrees with gay rights, and there is no need to discuss this." Meanwhile, Marquette spokesman Brian Dorrington told the Register that McAdams has not been suspended, but he has been "relieved of his teaching duties" while the university reviews his conduct. "Under the 'General Conduct' section of our employee handbook, the rules state that, behaving in an overtly discourteous, abusive or disrespectful manner toward a student is considered a violation of accepted policy and practice," Dorrington said.

The controversy at Marquette speaks to several long-standing concerns in Catholic higher education that many observers have expressed in recent years. Those hot-button issues deal with Catholic identity, academic freedom, political correctness and faithfulness to Church teaching at Catholic universities and colleges. The Louis Joliet Society, an organization of Marquette alumni and associates, told the Cardinal Newman Society's "Catholic Education Daily" that the McAdams situation gives credence to the "growing notion" that academic freedom is "nothing more than a sham" at Marquette.

Intolerant of Opposing Views?

McAdams, who has criticized Marquette's harassment policy as "absurdly vague," said that many activists on campus seek to stifle speech they consider offensive — even discussions defending Church teachings — under the banner of tolerance. "A lot of the politically correct types think a lot of the discussion ought to be suppressed," McAdams said. The Marquette controversy stems from an exchange one of McAdams' students had with Abbate last semester. Abbate led a class discussion about philosopher John Rawls' "equal-liberty principle," which holds that individuals have a right to as many basic liberties as possible, as long as they do not conflict with others' rights. The discussion focused on how Rawls' principle could be applied to various contemporary social issues, such as the criminalization of drugs, seatbelt laws and gun control.

One student suggested that a ban on same-sex "marriage" would violate the principle. Abbate said she wrote that example on the board as a correct way to apply Rawls' principle and that she then moved on to "more nuanced examples." Abbate said no student raised objections during the class, but, shortly after, a male student approached and accused her of shutting down the discussion. The student, who McAdams did not name in his blog post about the incident, said that data proves same-sex "marriage" is harmful to children — an assertion that Abbate challenged — and added that it was wrong for a teacher to "completely discredit one person's opinion," according to a recording of the conversation obtained by the Register.

Abbate said same-sex "marriage" and parenting were two separate topics, noting that single people can adopt children. The student, who recorded the conversation, said he was "very disappointed" and "personally offended" that Abbate did not choose to explore the same-sex "marriage" example more deeply in class. After the student

complained that she had discredited a student's opinion, Abbate responded that there were some opinions that were "not appropriate," such as sexist or racist opinions. Abbate went on to say that comments critical of homosexuality would not be tolerated, and she suggested the student drop her class if he did not like her policy, which he later did. Abbate also told the student, who asked her if opposing same-sex "marriage" was "homophobic," that his position would come across as such in her class in the same manner that she would take offense if someone said women's professional options should be limited. "To argue that individuals should not have rights is going to be offensive to someone in this class," Abbate said.

Abbate's Arguments

Abbate, who did not return a message seeking comment, says on her website that the class discussion was not about exploring public opinions of same-sex "marriage." Abbate wrote that she is not dismissive of Church teachings and added that she addressed the student's concerns about the same-sex "marriage" issue more directly during the subsequent class discussion. Abbate also noted that class time is limited and that there is not enough time to adequately discuss all topics of interest. She also said the original class discussion would have been different if the focus was natural-law theory rather than a specific philosophical principle.

"Catholic universities do not require that every philosophy discussion begin and end with Catholic doctrine and the history of Catholic thinking," Abbate wrote. "We are committed to a fair representation of Catholic doctrine and the history of Catholic teaching when they are relevant." However, McAdams suggested there were other factors to explain how Abbate handled the same-sex "marriage" discussion in class. "If she said, 'I don't think that topic would be a good use of class time,' fair enough. But she said, 'You can't make racist, homophobic and sexist comments,' and then she tells him how gays in the class would be offended if he spoke out against same-sex marriage. Basically, she doesn't want to discuss it because any discussion of same-sex marriage would be offensive to gays in the classroom," said McAdams, who wrote about the incident after the student informed him of his exchange with Abbate.

In his blog, McAdams accused Abbate of limiting free speech by "using a tactic typical among liberals," adding that "opinions with which they disagree are not merely wrong, and are not to be argued against on their merits, but are deemed 'offensive' and need to be shut up." McAdams also praised his student for being "rather outspoken and assertive about his beliefs." Wrote McAdams: "That puts him among a small minority of Marquette students. How many students, especially in politically correct departments like philosophy, simply stifle their disagreement, or worse yet, get indoctrinated into the views of the instructor, since those are the only ideas allowed, and no alternative views are aired?" Though Abbate said McAdams misrepresented events and attributed claims to her she did not make, McAdams' blog spread throughout the national media and blogosphere. Abbate said she has since received more than 100 derogatory and hateful emails, though some academics have come to her defense and published open letters of support.

Marquette's Actions

As the controversy spread, Marquette University President Michael Lovell distributed a Nov. 22 campus-wide letter about the university's expectations and guiding values to which all faculty and staff are required to adhere. "Respect is at the heart of our commitment to the Jesuit tradition and Catholic social teaching," wrote Lovell, who added that the university would "take action" to address any concerns alleging personal attacks, harassment and inappropriate behavior.

On Dec. 16, McAdams said he received an email from a university dean informing him that he was relieved of all teaching and faculty duties while the university reviewed his conduct. Attached to the email were Marquette's harassment policy, the university's guiding values and mission statements and sections from the faculty handbook outlining faculty rights and responsibilities. The email did not specify what McAdams was being investigated for, though a subsequent statement said the university this fall began reviewing concerns raised by Abbate. McAdams is receiving his salary and benefits while Marquette conducts its review. McAdams told the Register that university officials have not notified him of how the review is proceeding. "Presumably, they're trying to figure out what to do," he said.

On Dec. 22, the [Wisconsin Institute for Law and Liberty](#), a public interest law firm representing McAdams, sent a letter to Marquette University raising "serious legal issues" over the propriety of McAdams' so-called suspension, alleging it violates the university's faculty statutes and punishes McAdams for discussing a controversial topic, such

as same-sex marriage. "Dr. McAdams' post does not violate any faculty statute or other university requirement. Nothing in the statutes or other university policy prohibits a faculty member from publicly disagreeing with a graduate student, much less someone who has been given sole responsibility for a course and authority over every student enrolled in it," said Rick Esenberg, general counsel and president of the Wisconsin Institute for Law and Liberty.

McAdams Won't Back Down

McAdams, who added that he has received his own share of messages expressing support and accusing him of intolerance, said he hopes the controversy will prevent the university from taking harsh disciplinary action. He vowed a "court battle" if Marquette tries to fire him. "Or they may try to drag it out," he said, "and hope that this all dies out."

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