

A CASE OF FORBIDDING ACADEMIC ENGAGEMENT OF MUSLIM AND JEWISH BELIEFS ABOUT THE HOLY LAND

Douglas Giles

The religious, political, and social issues of the Middle East are not simplistic, nor are their effects. The complexities and the human elements deserve an academic engagement that is suitably broad, deep, and respectful. I am a professor of philosophy and religion; I do not claim to be an expert on Middle Eastern culture, history, or politics. But I do have a commitment to academic honesty and rigor in the courses that I am teaching, which includes a strong commitment to academic freedom, especially when it comes to student questioning and discussion. I teach philosophy and religion because I am fascinated by ideas and beliefs and try to share that enthusiasm with my students. I believe that an essential of education is exposure to diverse viewpoints and cultures and encouraging students to consider those diverse ideas openly and critically. I welcome questions in class and allow students to share their opinions and experiences. The nature of philosophy and religion is particularly amenable to this approach, and my students enjoy hearing diverse views and being encouraged to explore and share ideas and beliefs openly.

I was graciously invited by this journal to write an article about a 2005 incident in which my academic freedom and that of my students was violated. My particular case raises important issues for academic freedom and Middle Eastern studies. Anyone hoping to find a situation in which a professor made political statements opposing Israeli policy will be disappointed. This case is not about that. But the very fact that this case is not about that is what makes it significant. There are multiple issues of academic engagement and freedom: a student's right to question, a professor's right to teach, and everyone's right to free discussion. I will first give the details of the incident and how it was resolved and then discuss how the specifics of this case shed light on the important issues of academic freedom.

The Academic Freedom Case

In the fall term of 2005, I was in my fourth semester as a contingent faculty member at Roosevelt University in Chicago. Before joining the faculty at Roosevelt, I had

Douglas Giles is Professor of Philosophy at Elmhurst College, Illinois.

been teaching college philosophy and religion for six years. The then chair of the Department of History, Art History, and Philosophy (my official supervisor) was an administrator and art history professor who had never taught history, religion, or philosophy. Other than at the interview in which she hired me in December 2003, she and I had not spoken before she placed two phone calls to me at my home in September 2005.

The major topic of these phone calls was that she was disturbed to hear (she never mentioned from whom) that I allowed open questions and discussion in my world religions courses. I was not teaching world religions that Fall 2005 term, but had the previous term, which had ended May 2005. I was scheduled to teach world religions in the upcoming Spring 2006 term.

In the first phone call,¹ September 13, 2005, after several unspecific comments and questions, she asked me if Zionism was discussed in class, and I said yes, once. When she asked how and why, I told her that I did not bring up Zionism in class but a student asked about how she should think about the accusation made by some Muslim friends that Zionism is racism. I said that I had told the student that there were two dimensions to the discussion of Zionism, the political and the religious. In a religions course it wasn't really our place to go deep into the political dimensions, but I said that the religious dimension was the belief that the Jewish people have a God-given right to the land of Israel—a belief that stretches back to the very beginnings of the Jewish faith. I said that I explained to the class that both Jews and Muslims consider Jerusalem a holy city.

At that point, the supervisor interrupted me to ask how I could have allowed such a question in my class. I pointed out that I encourage students to ask any and all questions and that I don't know what questions they will ask until they ask them. Once the question was asked about Zionism and racism, I felt obligated to answer it as best I could.

The supervisor said she felt it was completely inappropriate to have any discussion at all about Zionism in a religion class because you can only discuss Zionism in a negative way and it opens up Judaism to attack. Before I could respond, she asked if I had included on a test a question about Zionism.

I said that yes, because the issue had been raised in class by the student's question and a class discussion had ensued from it, I included a question directly from a course textbook and read it to her: "What was the history of Zionism and how does it affect the current conflict between Israelis and Palestinians?" I told her I included it on the test along with eight other questions and students were allowed to choose four of those eight questions to answer, so it was up to them whether they answered it or not.

She asked, "How could you put a question about Zionism on a religion test? That is a totally inappropriate question."

“How is that an inappropriate question?” I asked. “To many Jewish believers, the Zionist movement expressed the belief and hope of the Jewish people that they will return to their homeland. It is a crucial element of Jewish history.”

“Yes,” she said, “but when you ask it as a question and say it is a conflict then you imply that it is an issue where there are two political sides.”

I acknowledged that maybe I should not have used the word “conflict.”

Her reply was, “I hope you see that bringing politics into this is wrong. I don’t think you can have ANY (emphasis hers) discussion of Zionism or the Palestinian issue other than in a political context” and it’s “disrespectful to any Jews in the class to mention either of those.”

She then added, “I hear you even allowed a Muslim to speak about their religion in class.” I responded, “Yes, of course, I allowed all students to speak, regardless of their religion. There were Protestants, Catholics, Russian Orthodox, Jews, Muslims, and Buddhists who all shared something about their beliefs and practices in class.”

She said at that point that she had to leave to go to a class and said that she was not questioning my qualifications as a professor and that she was not saying I was unsuited to teach a class. She repeated that she was not saying I wasn’t qualified to teach a religions class and that this was just a disagreement on approach.

A week later, September 20, 2005, she phoned me again at my home and immediately told me, “I just can’t get past that you allowed Zionism to come up in a religion class.”

I replied that she and I had discussed this last week and that I thought we had resolved the issue. She said she was still bothered by it and that my discussion of Zionism was “problematic.”

I reminded her that I was not the one who brought up Zionism in class, it was a student, to which she replied that that was the other thing that bothered her—that I allowed such open discussion in the classroom. “Your job as a professor in a world religions class is to tell them only the basic facts about each religion and nothing more.”

She said I was not to spend so much time in class answering student questions and not to respond to questions on certain topics. She said that in my world religions curriculum nothing should be mentioned in class, textbooks, or examinations that could possibly open up Judaism to criticism, especially any mention in any context of Zionism. Nothing related to Palestinians or Islamic beliefs about Jerusalem should be mentioned. Any discussion of Zionism or the Palestinian issue was, in her words, “disrespectful to any Jews in the class.”

She then asked me if my textbook for the class talked about the “Jewish-Arab” (her words) conflict. I said that it did and that I’d be happy to show it to her.

Her reply was, “Then you should not have chosen that textbook and you showed very poor judgment by picking it. That has NO (emphasis hers) business being mentioned.”

I asked: "So are you saying that in no way should..."

She interrupted me. "No, the Palestinian question is off limits."

"Well," I said, "it wasn't a unit in the class. You asked me if there was a section on it in the textbook and I said yes."

"But the problem," she said, "is that it was in the textbook for people to see, as was a section on Zionism I assume?" I said that yes, there was, next to a section on the Holocaust and the founding of the state of Israel. "That," she said, "is the problem; if you allow discussion of Zionism in class that just opens it up to criticism."

I said, "But my worry about what you say is that to forbid discussion of these issues in a religion class could leave students with the impression that there is no religious..."

She interrupted me at that point to say, "Our claims to the land of Israel go back to the time of Abraham! The Palestinians weren't on that land! The land was empty when the Israelis got there and only after Israel was founded did they start saying it was theirs! That land belongs to the Jews! THAT (emphasis hers) is what you should be teaching in a religion class!"

I responded (at this point flustered) that "of course I acknowledged the claim of the Jewish people and how it dated back to the Jewish Scriptures. I teach the beliefs of all of the religions."

"But you put this question into your test about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. What disturbs me, Douglas, is that you act like the Palestinians have a side in this. They don't have a side! They are ANIMALS (emphasis hers)! They strap bombs to their bodies and blow up women and children! They are NOT CIVILIZED! (emphasis hers)"

I was too shocked to know how to respond to that.

She then hurriedly told me she wasn't interested in discussing it any further and that she didn't want me to ever bring up this conversation again. She said she had to go and hung up.

At this point, I reported the two conversations to my union representative. A few days later, I received an e-mail from the supervisor saying I would no longer be teaching at Roosevelt starting the Spring 2006 semester—not just the world religions and philosophy courses I was scheduled to teach that semester, but ever. Roosevelt later termed it a "nonreappointment"; however, I think it is fair to call a permanent ban a job termination.

Union Grievance

I was extremely fortunate to have as my union the Roosevelt Adjunct Faculty Organization, or RAFO, and its parent union, the Illinois Education Association. These organizations consistently supported me in fighting this violation of academic

freedom. The union filed a formal grievance of my termination on the basis of a clause in our contract that protects the academic freedom of adjunct faculty. RAFO's executive council members risked their own faculty positions to fight for the rights of all faculty and students at Roosevelt. They were extraordinarily patient and gave Roosevelt every opportunity to resolve this case.

The grievance was handled on behalf of Roosevelt by the then assistant provost who responded with a succession of disingenuous delaying tactics. At one point, the assistant provost rejected a union grievance, in part, because "the grievance is simply an attempt by the union to overturn the university's decision." The assistant provost offered multiple cover stories to try to shift the argument away from the academic freedom violation. The cover stories were clearly manufactured, self-contradictory, and at times laughable in how obviously false they were. The assistant provost continually refused to consider our evidence, speak with our witnesses, negotiate in good faith, or provide requested information.

Throughout, Roosevelt never once denied that the supervisor had made the statements I reported and even defended her statements. The assistant provost declared in written responses to the grievance that "as chair of the department, the supervisor had a right to express her views." The assistant provost characterized the supervisor's comments disparaging Palestinians as an "academic discussion" in which she was "defending her position passionately." She even compared it to the "heated" discussion over whether to place a comma before the "and" in a series.

Perhaps more importantly in the broader picture, in response to the academic freedom provision in our contract, the basis of our grievance, the assistant provost declared that it is within the university's province, not the professors', to determine curriculum. She stated that what topics are covered in class and whether students are allowed to ask questions in class are not academic issues but pedagogical issues. Therefore, issues of the content and conduct of a course are not covered under the provisions of academic freedom. In my opinion, what the assistant provost was attempting to do was use my case to change the playing field between the school administration and the union. It was about control of contingent faculty—an attempt to create an environment in which anything the university wants to control can be declared a pedagogical issue and thus exempted from academic freedom protections.

I won't belabor the reader with the details of the long grievance process, very little of which dealt with the substance of the academic freedom violation but instead devolved into procedural squabbling over the legitimacy of the union's right to bring grievances under the adjunct faculty collective bargaining agreement. What I can tell you is that the end result was a settlement in October 2006 in which I was offered to return to teach at Roosevelt University. Having found new and, in my opinion, better employment at another college, I declined the offer.

I also want to thank the American Philosophical Association whose advocacy on my behalf in standing up for academic freedom was instrumental in reaching a satisfactory conclusion. The APA wrote a very strong letter to Roosevelt stressing the importance of allowing philosophy professors academic freedom and demanding that I be reinstated. I should also point out that the supervisor and the assistant provost who defended her are both no longer employed by Roosevelt University even though Roosevelt has never apologized for nor expressed disapproval of their statements and actions.

Discussion

Certainly there is much to discuss about Zionism, especially in its political dimensions, but that is not what this case is about. The problem the supervisor had wasn't anything I said about Judaism, the state of Israel, or the Palestinians but the fact that I allowed students to discuss the issue at all and that the beliefs of Islam were allowed to be discussed openly. What moved a supervisor to silence a professor was the fear that any open and honest discussion could take place on the issues of the Middle East.

The reason for my termination is clear. Because I allowed open and respectful discussion of Judaism and Islam in my classes, I was censored from future teaching at Roosevelt. As bizarre, though, as the administrator's statements and actions were, they were matched by the ensuing actions of the Roosevelt assistant provost who defended the attempt to ban free academic discussion as protected academic speech.

There are two dimensions to this academic freedom violation. First is the blatant censorship of student and faculty discussion perpetrated by the supervisor that clearly had an ideological dimension. Second is the attempt by a university administrator to dismantle the rights of contingent faculty and faculty unions, even if it meant defending blatant bigotry and censorship. Although the plight of contingent faculty is an issue of great importance and urgency, I will leave that discussion for another venue. I will discuss the relevance of this case to the topic of academic speech about the Middle East.

Regardless of anyone's personal religious or political beliefs, there are certain facts that must be admitted. It is a fact that many Jews believe that Eretz Israel is a land promised to the Jews by God according to the Bible. It is a fact that Muslims consider the city of Jerusalem to be a sacred site important to their religion. Acknowledging the fact that groups of people have particular beliefs in no way endorses those beliefs. To deny these beliefs is intellectually dishonest, disrespectful to the people who hold them, and disrespectful to academic discussion. Acknowledging these religious beliefs is essential to a robust academic engagement of the complex issues surrounding the Middle East and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

That phrase, “the Israeli-Palestinian conflict,” is a good place to start. The supervisor in this instance seemed to want there to be no acknowledgement that there is an Israeli-Palestinian conflict, saying that it was completely inappropriate to have any discussion at all about it. Denying that there is any disagreement is a very direct way of silencing discussion of an issue. If one has the power to silence discussion, then only the viewpoint of the interests in power are heard—the status quo becomes a *fait accompli*, implicitly justified while disagreement is implicitly condemned. The supervisor’s demand of me was that I not allow in the course any acknowledgement of the conflict. I was to acknowledge “only the basic facts,” but whose facts? It was an attempt to prevent students from engaging the issue and even learning that there is an issue. She was telling me to lie, mislead students, and advance a biased ideology.

The ostensive issue for the supervisor was the topic of Zionism. Notwithstanding the political dimensions of Zionism, it has a religious dimension that is relevant to a world religions course and that intertwines with the political dimensions. The Zionist movement is part of the history of Judaism. Professors who teach world religions are charged to give an honest history of religions. It would be inappropriate for a world religions professor to abuse his or her position to advance an agenda that distorts history and forces students to acquiesce to a narrow and even bigoted ideology of any kind, whether promoting or condemning Zionism. But it would also be inappropriate for a professor to pretend that Zionism and the beliefs that support it do not exist. Both distortion and refusal foreclose discussion, yet this is what the supervisor wanted me to do, which was just an implicit attempt at propaganda, so I refused to do it.

In response to the student’s question about Zionism, I explained to the class the religious dimensions of the belief of many Jews that God has promised the land of Israel to them and will eventually lead them back to the land but that there is disagreement among Jews as to when and how God will lead the Jews back to the land. I explained that both Jews and Muslims consider Jerusalem a holy city, which is why religious belief is a factor in the current conflict in Israel and Palestine. I also explained that the charge that Zionism is racism was political speech and that Zionism itself is not necessarily racist, though political forces, some using religious trappings, use religious beliefs about Israel to justify social and political actions. The class responded very positively and there was discussion about the beliefs about the land from both Jews and Muslims. I was quite surprised that a number of students were unaware of Muslim religious beliefs about Jerusalem, just as many students are unaware that Judaism and Islam believe in the same God and both see themselves as children of Abraham/Ibrahim. Students were eager to learn about more than just the media headlines. They wanted to understand some of the issues that

lay beneath the conflicts they had heard about. I have found that most students, with a little encouragement, are eager to question and seek beyond superficial answers.

What seemed to underlie all of the supervisor's objections was that nothing be allowed in a course that could possibly open up Judaism to criticism. She said that there should be nothing mentioned that would be "disrespectful to any Jews in the class." Respect is a virtue, and we owe it to all human beings. We should not engage in discussions or adopt textbooks that are willfully disrespectful to a group of people. But the supervisor was not asking for that basic human respect; she wanted to carve out an exceptional status for a particular group of people. Her actions were not shielding a group from attacks but shielding a topic from critical discussion and academic engagement. What she found "disrespectful" was simply a student asking about Judaism or the professor asking the students to think about Judaism. Drawing the line at "nothing that could possibly open up the subject to criticism" is an extreme line to draw. It reduces possible discussion to mere platitudes of agreement. As I have mentioned before, to say there is nothing to discuss is a means of censorship.

What precipitated the whole discussion, by the supervisor's own admission, was that I allowed student questions in class. I find it utterly unthinkable, even reprehensible, that a college professor would not allow questions in class. The purpose of education is to train students in critical thinking. This apparently was not what the supervisor wanted. What she apparently wanted was what I would call indoctrination—students being asked merely to listen, take notes, and regurgitate what the professor says. Her statement that "your job as a professor in a world religions class is to tell them only the basic facts about each religion and nothing more" was nothing more or less than an order to indoctrinate students in a single interpretation of a subject.

The specific student question here was one that we should celebrate, not suppress. The student said basically that "I have heard some people I know make some strong statements against a belief, so how should I think about this?" Such willingness to listen and engage in critical thinking is an attitude that we need more of. Lest we lose sight of the larger concern in the face of the contentiousness of the topic of Zionism, we should look at the structure of the question. Insert any other belief or group of people into her question. What if the student asked about statements against women, workers, American Indians, Africans, or Aborigines? Should the professor respond with "that is not an appropriate subject to discuss"? Such censorship should appall us, especially when the question touches on the subject of racism or other forms of bigotry. A discussion of social justice—the human rights of all peoples—requires practicing social justice in the classroom. That means allowing freedom for all speech that does not seek to silence other speech. If a question is sincere and leads to respectful and honest discussion of a subject, then there is no reason to suppress it. (I, of course, understand the issues of germaneness and time constraints regarding

what subjects can be discussed in class—we can't hope to adequately address every question and every subject.) Respectful open class discussion is necessary to ensure students receive their basic human rights of freedom of thought and expression. Quite a few times over the year-plus long saga of my grievance, other professors would say to me they wished their students would ask more questions, not fewer. I couldn't agree more.

The supervisor also made a direct attack on Muslims in general and Palestinians in particular. Even if we generously say her calling Palestinians "animals" was simply an emotional outburst, she was being sober in her insistence that it is "inappropriate" to acknowledge that the Palestinians have a side and that to do so was "disrespectful" to Jews. I characterize her statements as bigoted and having no place in any discussion, much less an academic one. She attempted literally to dehumanize a group of people and force an entire college course to do the same. She also pressured me to forbid all mention of the Muslim belief in the holiness of Jerusalem. It was not that I said anything at all about Palestinians but her fear that in an open discussion someone might begin to see the Palestinians as human beings with basic human rights—a position her statements indicate she does not endorse. The supervisor's attempts to forbid mention of the Muslim belief in the holiness of Jerusalem should rightly appall us. But we should be equally appalled if someone attempted to forbid mention of the Jewish or Christian beliefs in the holiness of Jerusalem. The classroom is not a gladiatorial arena for the purposes of vanquishing undesirable points of view. To reduce the history of the Middle East to an Us-versus-Them dualism is disrespectful to all concerned. It renders meaningful discussion difficult, if not impossible, and it all but precludes possibilities of solutions. The professor doesn't have to be an expert on every dimension of all complicated issues, but he or she does have to show respect for the issues.

In a talk on my case that I was invited to give at the University of Toronto, I was asked if I felt that respecting viewpoints extended to the viewpoints of oppressors and to giving a fair hearing to their reasons for oppression. My reply to that excellent question is that no one is above criticism and no one is beneath being accorded human dignity. As academics, we do have to take stances. We cannot turn a blind eye to oppression. My ethics professor in college told us that if you cannot condemn Hitler, then there is something seriously wrong with your ethical system. Of course, that idea has applications broader than Hitler. If we in academia cannot stand up against atrocities, then there is something seriously wrong with our pedagogy. We cannot give equal time and respect to propaganda that seeks to demonize, marginalize, or silence the viewpoints and rights of other people. I say that we can discuss the rationales of oppressors because that exposes their rational and moral inadequacy. We should not mistake an open discussion for an endorsement of a viewpoint. To acknowledge that there is a religious belief among Jews that Israel

is their God-given land in no way endorses or excuses Israeli policies. Nor would acknowledging Islamic beliefs about Jerusalem in any way endorse or excuse acts of terrorism. Perhaps acknowledging the religious beliefs that hang about events in the Middle East can help us to stand for what we believe is right. We certainly cannot hope to understand the Israeli-Palestinian issue if we ignore the religious beliefs of both sides.

Autonomy in the classroom is a crucial component of academic freedom for faculty and students. Professors must be free from external influences in how they conduct their classes. Increasingly, there is too much discussion of and too many assertions about what's going on in the classroom by people who are not in the classroom. Professors, not administrators (much less anyone outside the academy), know and interact with the students. The professor as mentor and facilitator is in the best position to understand and respond to student questions. The professor as subject matter expert is in the best position to design course curricula. In my case, for several months I had known and interacted with the student who asked the question about Zionism. From her previous questions and comments, I understood the spirit and intent of her question, something an administrator relying only on hearsay could not. I also knew what had been discussed before by the class and could therefore fit the question into the background of previous discussions. The educational enterprise is severely damaged if administrators or external forces attempt to restrict classroom curricula or dialogue to suit an ideological agenda. Open and unrestricted dialogue and exchange are essential to learning. Academic freedom means the ability of professors to teach their subjects openly and honestly without interference or fear of retribution. Professors must be free to engage controversial issues in classroom discussion and be allowed to respond to student questions without fear of retribution. Academic freedom also means the ability of students to ask questions without interference or fear of retribution. All students, regardless of background, should be allowed to make comments or ask questions, as long as they are germane to the discussion. These two freedoms—the freedom to teach and the freedom to learn—coincide and must be fought for on an equal basis.

Conclusion

I have always wondered how many similar cases we have never heard of because either the administrators had been more surreptitious or the professors had, for their own reasons, not felt that fighting back was a good option for them. How many violations of academic freedom have there been to ensure a “patriotic correctness” in today’s USA or used as a means of eliminating activists and other “undesirables” among faculty?

The central ideal of academic freedom is clear, though attacks on academic freedom can have murky and complicated origins and motives. There are religious, political, and corporate motives to control speech and content in academia. There are forces within colleges that are willing to collaborate with external interests and also have their own motives to control classroom speech. In the developing economic model of corporatized education, professors are seen decreasingly as mentors who educate and increasingly as cogs in the machine that churns out graduates. College administrators increasingly view their institutions as factories, mere economic engines. Just as factory owners desire their machines to perform predictably, so do college administrators desire their faculty to be predictable machines and their students to be docile predictable consumers. An effective means to achieve these ends is to control the terms of dialogue. Thus, professors are discouraged from stimulating thought or allowing open discussion—they are supposed to deliver only a standardized, commoditized curriculum. We are to teach only the basic facts, with those facts determined not by professors but by the powers that be. A docile academic machine is amenable to certain interests.

There are those who want to drag us into a world of “one size fits all” viewpoints, where truth is defined, not by questioning, but by not questioning; where the world is defined as an Us in contradistinction to a Them who we do not respect, do not dialogue with, and certainly do not treat as if they have anything to say. I was fired for seeing my students as people, especially for seeing Muslims as people; for allowing an open discussion, however small, of the complexities of the Middle East. I was fired for being a teacher, for doing what I am supposed to do, for what our profession demands that we do. If any professor can be fired for being objective and respectful, than anyone, truly anyone, can be fired.

Note

1. My descriptions of the phone calls are from notes that I wrote down immediately following them.

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