

insidehighered.com

Nov. 4, 2008

College Bans Nietzsche Quote on Prof's Door

“God is dead.” That phrase, from Friedrich Nietzsche’s *The Gay Science*, is among the philosopher’s most well known — and most hotly debated.

At Temple College, a community college in Texas, the words in the original German — *Gott ist tot* — have been barred from a professor’s office door. While the college says that to leave the phrase up would offend others and constitute an endorsement of the phrase, the professor and others see a double standard in place, and a violation of academic freedom.

Kerry Laird, a literature and composition professor who does not have tenure, is in his first year at Temple. He said that, as a student and instructor, he always enjoyed the way professors use their office doors to reveal bits of their personality and to challenge students with cartoons, artwork, and various phrases. So when he started at Temple, he put a cartoon up showing Smokey the Bear, a girl scout and a boy scout and the tag line: “Kids — don’t fuck with God or bears will eat you.” He received a complaint and decided that he understood why the college “might not want the f-word” in the hallway, and so he decided to put up something else.

This time he turned to Nietzsche and, striving to challenge while being more subtle, he only used the German version of the quote, not the English translation. “I didn’t want to be too blunt,” he said.

But he was quickly told that Mark A. Smith, interim vice president of educational services, had ordered the saying removed. And Laird said he had no choice in the matter.

Smith outlined his views in an e-mail message he sent to a student who complained about the quote’s removal. “Temple College as a public institution cannot be represented as showing preference toward any religious philosophy/perspective or toward the opposite, being atheism. The same practice goes for politics. The decision to have the quote removed was that the quote can be considered very controversial and offensive to others. In fact, other people have already expressed that the wording is offensive!” he wrote.

In a classroom setting, a professor would have the right to discuss such a quote, Smith said.

The student maintains that the college permits numerous professors to have “pro-religion” statements or images on their doors.

That argument doesn’t fly with Misti Kennai, an agnostic student who wrote Smith to say she was “inundated daily with biblical quotes” in offices around the college. “Why is it

that when a quote that contradicts the beliefs of the administration of Temple College is posted, it is forcibly removed? Are the Christians on campus that insecure in their religious beliefs? Although the majority of people on campus are Christian, it is not the only religion present on this campus. If this quote is removed by this administration, then I propose all quotes promoting Christianity on campus also be forcibly removed. I do not personally believe that ‘with God all things are possible.’ On the contrary, I believe God is indeed dead, or she may have never existed at all.”

Smith, the interim vice president who made the decision, says that pro-Christian statements would be treated the same way as the Nietzsche quote. But he clarified to *Inside Higher Ed* that this means if someone complains about a specific quote — as someone did about the Nietzsche quote — the person would be asked to remove it.

Generally, public colleges and universities get in trouble when they try to censor professors’ doors or office displays. The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education has taken up the case of a professor at Lake Superior State University who was [threatened with a reprimand](#) over various right-leaning images on his door. The University of Minnesota at Duluth spent much of the 1990s defending itself with limited success against suits by two historians who said that their rights were violated when photos of one in a coonskin cap and the other in ancient Roman attire — both holding period weapons — were removed from a departmental display case. The university eventually agreed to pay the professors to settle their suits.

Laird, the Nietzsche fan at Temple College, said that he believes religious professors and non-religious professors should have equal rights to display images that reflect their views, regardless of whether someone is offended. “To me, this is a blatant disregard of freedom of speech and freedom of religion.”

Cary Nelson, national president of the American Association of University Professors, agreed. “There is simply no justification for ordering the removal of a Nietzsche quote from a faculty member’s door,” he said. “The quote constitutes an intellectual challenge. That’s why colleges and universities exist. This is a clear violation of academic freedom.”

Laird and others have said that it is particularly troubling that a college administrator cited as reason to order the quote’s removal that some found it “offensive.” If quotes that some find offensive can’t be displayed, how many philosophers would be safe to quote on a door at Temple?

William O. Stephens, a philosopher at Creighton University and chair of the American Philosophical Association Committee for the Defense of the Professional Rights of Philosophers, said that from ancient times on, great philosophers have caused offense. “That’s why they put Socrates to death,” he said. “He expressed non-traditional views.”

Added Stephens: “Fortunately philosophers aren’t being executed in the United States for articulating non-traditional views on religion, but this should still be embarrassing to that

college. You should be able to express your academic and intellectual views without reprisal.”

— Scott Jaschik