

The Middlebury Campus - May 9, 1991 - Opinions

Upham misunderstands PC

by Hugh Coyle

Editors Note: The author is the Administrative Director of the Bread Loaf School of English.

Recent discussions concerning “political correctness,” harassment, and freedom of speech on campus have done nothing if not shown that some members of the student body are entertaining a paranoid notion of administrative fascism running rampant at Middlebury College.

‘PC-ness’ has been trotted out as being responsible for everything from the raising of the drinking age in Vermont to the dissolution of the fraternities here at Middlebury. Vague and elusive in its depiction by those who are quick to tar and feather the idea, political correctness has become the scapegoat of the year.

In their portrayals of this beast, students have resorted to incredible exaggeration and unfounded hypothesizing in regards to actual practice. Some have even demonstrated a complete misunderstanding of the ideas behind political correctness, but inasmuch as it is everyone’s favorite target these days, these students feel safe in their ignorance, shielded as they are by the general public’s own

hostile misappropriation of the term. If you want to push people's panic buttons, just mention "political correctness."

David Upham's most recent article in the Campus uses a similar tactic to defend his own beliefs about homosexuals. Upham continues to claim that Middlebury is stifling discourse on notions such as this even as he mentions a course which has discussed the matter over the winter term and even as his own article appears in print like some glorious test case of the freedom of the press.

Well, that freedom has been preserved, and freedom of speech along with it. But let's turn the tables for a moment, shall we? Let us take what Upham claims is being prohibited here at Middlebury—the "expression of the religious tenets of Roman Catholicism and of religions that regard homosexual acts as immoral"—and substitute it for "political correctness."

It is not hard to do; Upham himself gives us a classic example of the type of environment which results from such a *(continued on page 25)*

(continued from page 24) switch. It is one in which views promoting tolerance of homosexuality are considered wrong and are stifled (Kevin Moss's

excellent rebuttal of Upham's first letter would have been completely censored, for example); in which homosexuals themselves are silenced, criminalized, and persecuted (or, in the extreme historical manifestations of such righteous religious zeal, murdered) —in short, it is an exchange of one world order for another.

No matter whose world order you are looking at, it seems someone's always being persecuted. In olden days, left-handed people were burned at the stake because left-handedness was “intrinsicly evil,” a mark of the devil dwelling within a person.

But before I succumb to my PC tendencies and pass this off as an idea of “the silly, intolerant past, and certainly not (an) idea to be taken seriously by the enlightened people of the modern age” (to quote Mr. Upham’s portrayal of PCness in action), let me note that scientific study has shown that ten percent of any population is left-handed, just as ten percent of any population is homosexual.

Of course, you could argue that left-handed people do not pose a threat to society the way homosexuals do. Mr. Upham defends his right to do just that, yet curiously does not feel compelled to justify his argument in any rational way. Instead, he simply dismisses homosexual acts as “contrary to the physical and spiritual nature of man” and calls them

“both unnatural and intrinsically evil,” as though such ideas are absolute and indisputable givens. And then he goes on to fret about “political correctness” dictating morality on college campuses....

Once we start looking beyond the negative labels that have been attached to the tenets of political correctness, we might just find that there are some pretty good ideas there waiting to be utilized. Then again, many students feel it would be easier just to ditch the whole concept. By the same practice, we could go through the inventory of value systems and ideologies and ditch every other code of behavior, including Upham's take on Roman Catholicism.

Political correctness may have its problems, but in that it embodies a greater sensitivity to diversity and a more inclusive distribution of societal power, I would prefer it any day to a community whose indoctrination into morality includes the beliefs of someone like Mr. Upham.

Lurking behind these claims that political correctness is infringing on the rights of students is a resentment that such infringement is coming from someone else's (read: the administration's) codes of ethics and morality. Perhaps we would all rather be the oppressors than the oppressed, but at least under the tenets of political correctness and in this particular academic community, the levels of that oppression are held

to more reasonable limits. It may not be the “real world,” but it is real enough for those of us who live and work in it—students, staff, faculty, and administration alike—all of whom are accountable for observing the sort of social responsibility implicit in codes of behavior such as the sexual harassment policy at Middlebury.