

SERIOUS TIMES

MAKING YOUR LIFE MATTER IN AN URGENT DAY

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Moral Retards

Timothy Shortell, a Brooklyn College professor, recently dropped his bid to become chairman of the department of sociology due to outrage over his description of religious people as “moral retards.” The controversial remarks, brought to the surface through his bid for chairmanship, come from an essay he published in 2003 in the online journal *Fifteen Credibility Street*, in which he argued that religious people are incapable of moral action and that in the heart of Christians in particular you find “self-righteousness, paranoia, and hatred.” What was apparently an earlier version of the on-line essay added, “Christians claim that theirs is a faith based on love, but they’ll just as soon kill you.” He even suggests that Christians have a greater proclivity toward child molestation.

For a taste of his rhetoric, here is a sample paragraph from the essay:

“On a personal level, religiosity is merely annoying – like pop music or reality television. This immaturity represents a significant social problem, however, because religious adherents fail to recognize their limitations. So, in the name of their faith, these moral retards are running around pointing fingers and doing real harm to others. One only has to read the newspaper to see the results of their handiwork. They discriminate, exclude, and belittle. They make a virtue of closed-mindedness and virulent ignorance. They are an ugly, violent lot.”

Claiming he was the victim of a political attack, Shortell expressed anger at the treatment he received from other members of his department, as well as the administration’s “inadequate” defense of his academic freedom.

The irony, of course, is how professor Shortell seemed oblivious to the venom of his own words, and the lack of academic freedom it portended for people of faith in his department should he be

made chairman. A Brooklyn senior, Eldad Yaron, said: "This person has control right now on the content of many classes every student will take. Just imagine how fair and balanced these classes will be." Yaron added, "For a man who says religious people are inherently violent and incapable of moral action, to actually hire, promote, or evaluate a religious professor in good faith would be an impossible thing to do."

But the greater challenge rests with the relationship between Christians and the academy. There is a desperate need for Christians to not only take advantage of education, but to then pursue a life of academic scholarship – to answer the vocational call to academia in any number of topics for the express purpose of making their mark for God in that arena. This is a highly significant need, for as George Marsden observes in *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship*, the "contemporary university culture is hollow at its core." Or as a Harvard Law School professor once expressed, many professors have become like "priests who have lost their faith, and kept their jobs." There is a great need, argues Marsden, to explicit discussion of the relationship between religious faith to learning. But this can only be pursued if Christians answer God's call to the university, and from that position, relate their belief in God to all thinking. Sadly, Marsden notes that even the Christians who *are* academics have not reflected much on the relationship of their faith to their intellectual life.

Brooklyn College, which has more than 15,000 students, observed its 75th anniversary this year. It was named one of the top 10 best values among undergraduate institutions in the country by the Princeton Review. But Brooklyn College is more than that. Like every other institution devoted to higher education, it is a mission field filled with students who many perceive to be at their last, best season for responding to Christ. So it was particularly poignant to read these words from Daniel Tauber, president-elect of Brooklyn College's student government: "I would like to see professors in high positions who don't believe religious people are moral retards."

James Emery White

Sources

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About Serious Times

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