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Professor charges anti-Catholic bias

By Deb McCown

THE WASHINGTON TIMES

A college philosophy instructor says he filed a lawsuit in federal court after school administrators punished him for telling students that his personal philosophy is based on his Catholic faith.

The complaint states that administrators at Lakeland Community College outside Cleveland stripped James Tuttle of his seniority, reduced his teaching load and salary, and failed to renew his contract after a student complained about Mr. Tuttle's comments in class and disclaimer on his course syllabus, on which the teacher identifies himself as "a Catholic Christian philosopher and theologian."

Mr. Tuttle, who filed the claim June 30, taught Introduction to Philosophy and said he invited students to meet with him if they felt uncomfortable.

"I wanted to be upfront with people," Mr. Tuttle said. "Candor, honesty, truth in advertising."

James Brown, dean of the school's arts and humanities department, said in a letter to Mr. Tuttle in April 2003 that he was "bothered" by the disclaimer, which Mr. Tuttle has been using for three semesters.

"I'm beginning to question your suitability to teach in a public school classroom," Mr. Brown wrote. "I think that you would be happier in a sectarian classroom."

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Lakeland had no comment, said Mary Ann Blakeley, executive assistant to school President Morris Beverage. Lakeland attorney James Heckenberg did not immediately return phone calls seeking comment.

Mr. Tuttle continues to teach philosophy and religion at Cuyahoga Community College, where he also instructed while at Lakeland.

"I was quite stunned," he said. "I like Lakeland. ... I love the teachers there. I've had a great relationship with the faculty, students and the staff."

His lawsuit contends that Lakeland violated his First Amendment rights to free speech and freedom of religion, as well as his Fifth Amendment right to "due process of law."

David French, president of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), a conservative free-speech advocacy group involved in the case, said the school's actions are "hostile to real diversity."

"Anytime a university singles out one point of view for censorship and leaves other points of view alone, you have a viewpoint-discrimination issue, which is a fundamental violation of the free-speech clause of the First Amendment," Mr. French said.

Tuttle attorney Jeffrey Brauer said the goal is to have his client on staff again at Lakeland in the fall.

Mr. Brauer contends that Mr. Tuttle, whose class included Catholic philosophers and their critics, "spoke about the issue to the extent that it is relevant to a philosophy class."

"He wasn't preaching in class," the lawyer said. "This is a man who was simply being candid about his views and, like any college professor out there teaching any subject, he has studied a great deal in an area that is of particular interest. He told people upfront what it is."

"To me, it's academic freedom I'm fighting for," Mr. Tuttle said. "This is not for myself. This is for other people, too."

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