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# Trumping Moses and Matthew

By Suzanne Fields

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What do the Bible and the "The Vagina Monologues" have in common? Not much. But surely we can all agree that both are covered by the First Amendment, guaranteeing freedom of religion and freedom of expression.

Well, that's not so at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. At UWEC you can live in a dorm and watch a performance of "The Vagina Monologues," but you can't join a Bible studies group. Any resident assistant, or RA, as the live-in student counselors are called, can put on a performance of the play, and one has, but leading a Bible studies class in his or her own room and on his or her own time, is forbidden. Many students want such a class, but they're out of luck.

The director of university housing says the ban is necessary to enable the RAs to "share" the perspectives of the students, to make RAs "approachable." Vagina perspective trumps the perspectives of Moses and Matthew in behalf of "approachability." That certainly sounds postmodern enough.

Where have we found such empty-headed university administrators? This destructive silliness goes to the root of politically correct attitudes: Feminist ideology, good; the Bible, bad. Dismissing the begats so easily begets intolerance and ignorance. Reaching for moral equivalence, the housing director reassures critics that the Koran and the Torah are banned, too. The university is now considering an extension of the bans to forbid political and ideological discussions.

Such flouting of the traditions of free speech -- and good sense -- is typical of the disease of political correctness that in various forms infects many campuses, denying students a fundamental understanding of the meaning of free speech. "The First Amendment doesn't end with Bible study or with 'The Vagina Monologues' -- it guarantees a student's right to perform both," says David French, president of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), a six-year-old watchdog organization and clearinghouse for the bad news of campus offenses against free speech.

This latest offense follows another objection at UWEC where the student senate barred funding to any campus organization that promotes a "particular ideological, religious, or partisan viewpoint." That covers just about anything a curious student could talk to anyone about. Not so long ago -- within the memory of Americans still alive -- universities set rules to inhibit sensual temptation, to protect young people at an age when they were particularly vulnerable to sexual promiscuity. Now sexual promiscuity is barely an elective, and Big Brother and Sister Nanny shield everyone from the temptation of intellectual debate of secular and religious philosophies. By banning free speech, the universities impose indoctrination in lieu of learning. The Founding Fathers are spinning, but they're only dead white men, after all.

FIRE's website (thefire.org) includes maps with ratings of colleges that routinely punish students and faculty for saying things that hurt feelings and threaten "self-esteem." Although some college administrators retreat in the face of challenges of these speech codes, a casual survey turns up a catalog of taboos of language and dumb jokes.

Bowdoin College, for example, bans jokes and stories "experienced by others as harassing." Brown University prohibits "verbal behavior" that produces "feelings of impotence, anger, or disenfranchisement," whether "intentional or unintentional." Colby College outlaws speech that causes "a vague sense of danger" or a loss of

"self-esteem." The University of Connecticut prohibits "inappropriately directed laughter." Only dangerous subversives dare watch "Comedy Central" at UConn. Syracuse University nixes "offensive remarks . . . sexually suggestive staring . . . [and] sexual, sexist, or heterosexist remarks or jokes." No daydreaming of trysts at Syracuse.

West Virginia University tells freshmen to use language that is not "gender specific." So "girlfriend" and "boyfriend" are out; "lover" or "partner" is in. Maybe they'll stage a production of "Romeo and Juliet" in drag. The University of North Dakota defines harassment as anything that intentionally produces "psychological discomfort, embarrassment, or ridicule." If a "person" comes out of the ladies room trailing toilet paper from the bottom of her foot, a la Gilda Radner in a memorable "Saturday Night Live" skit, make sure you don't tell her about it.

These speech codes would be laughable if they weren't so serious. But there's a larger lesson here. "If students on our nation's campuses learn that jokes, remarks and visual displays that 'offend' someone may rightly be banned, they will not find it odd or dangerous when the government itself seeks to censor and to demand moral conformity in the expression of its citizens," warns FIRE. "A nation that does not educate in freedom will not survive in freedom, and will not even know when it has lost." We need those FIRE alarms.

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