

CONCLUSION: FIGHTING BACK

It is easy for persecuted individuals and groups to feel alone. It is extremely rare for a persecuted student to be a part of a religious majority on campus or to be perceived as part of the mainstream of campus life. University officials often feel free to attack religious individuals precisely because such students (or faculty) often have little or no campus support.

This feeling of isolation is compounded when the persecuted individual is instructed repeatedly to keep the dispute “in the community,” as if universities were somehow sacrosanct entities that would be corrupted by the knowledge and outrage of “outsiders.” Many southern sheriffs defending segregation used to talk that way in the 1950s. The pressure to stay silent is reinforced by “secret” meetings and “confidential,” “informal” contacts. Administrators indicate to accused students that

they will receive reasonable treatment if they agree to campus “dialogue” (a code word for what totalitarians call “thought reform” and “re-education”). The power of vocal anti-religious campus activists also serves to convince religious students that any extra attention to their problem will only cause them more harm. If the world is against them, why invite more of the world into the dispute?

Although it requires no small amount of courage to bear moral witness, you should never acquiesce to demands to “keep quiet” or to disingenuous pressure to “resolve” things “within the community.” Your freedom is the foundation of everyone else’s freedom, whether they know that or not. It is malicious for campus officials to bring charges against isolated religious individuals or groups and then reinforce their isolation by insisting that they cut off their access to outside assistance. This malice is also a mark of weakness, because it arises ultimately from fear. It is rare, indeed, for oppressors to survive the glare of publicity unscathed, especially in a nation as devoted to religious liberty and religious pluralism as America historically has been. To say the least, you are *not* alone.

In the long run, there are many individuals and groups beyond the walls of your campus who will support your rights passionately and vigorously. This large group includes many, many people who may disagree thoroughly with your religious beliefs, but who will never-

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“Both morals and sound policy require that the state should not violate the conscience of the individual. . . . So deep in its significance and vital, indeed, is it to the integrity of man’s moral and spiritual nature that nothing short of self-preservation of the state should warrant its violation; and it may well be questioned whether the state which preserves its life by a settled policy of violation of the conscience of the individual will not in fact ultimately lose it by the process.”

CHIEF JUSTICE HARLAN FISKE STONE
“The Conscientious Objector,” (1919)

theless defend your crucial right to express your views and to live by the lights of your conscience without being charged with harassment. Such supporters will need to know, of course, that the time, place, and manner of your religious expression did not interfere with the rights and safety of others. If they know that you truly are being prosecuted for the content of your beliefs, they will not be indifferent. They will understand far more than campus zealots could ever imagine that it is *not* a violation of the rights and safety of others to express or bear witness to something that others merely find unpleasant, offensive, or psychologically uncomfortable.

Realize that while political orthodoxies may seem to rule unchallenged at your institutions, they do not govern mainstream American life. This is a nation that truly values religious liberty and individual rights. Campus

oppressors, when forced to explain their actions to the press, to alumni, or to judges, look foolish, hypocritical, and more concerned with advancing their academic careers than with protecting the essential freedoms of their students and faculty.

Realize, too, that you cannot delegate your fight for freedom to like-minded faculty members. If you want to protect your rights, then you must act. Recent court decisions have resulted in *less* academic freedom for professors and administrators. Students generally possess more free speech rights and religious liberties than any other person or entity on campus, and therefore it is students who must take the lead in protecting those freedoms. The reason that students are generally freer than professors is that they are legally *customers* of the college, while professors are its employees. As in any business, an employer has considerable latitude to establish working rules for its employees, although academic employees are protected to some considerable extent by academic freedom. Students, however, enjoy greater leeway. A store may instruct its clerks to greet customers with “Good morning” and may punish them for not complying. It may not deal in a similar manner, to say the least, with its customers.

When you defend your liberty, you will not fight alone. In the words of the late Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis: “Sunlight is the best disinfectant.” Campus oppressors cannot justify in the light of day

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what they do to students within what FIRE's co-founders, Alan Charles Kors and Harvey A. Silverglate, term "The Shadow University." The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education exists to bring oppression to light, and, once it has been exposed, to destroy it. To that end, FIRE sustains a formidable array of media contacts, academic relationships, and legal allies across the broadest spectrum of opinion, all of whom are committed to individual rights. Persecuted members of the academic community—even if they are completely isolated on campus—should not feel alone. Since 1999, FIRE has deployed its resources on behalf of individual students, faculty members, and student groups at schools small and large, public and private. If your individual rights are being trampled, visit www.thefire.org. FIRE will defend you, and, in similar circumstances, it will defend the real rights of your critics. Liberty and legal equality are not merely for this or that individual or group. They are a way of being human that leaves us capable, within the law, of moral choice and personal responsibility. Religious liberty, as the world has learned, is one of the most vital aspects of human freedom and dignity.

The struggle for campus religious liberties has truly begun. After almost four decades of retreat, religious individuals are beginning to draw their own rightful lines and to make their own stands at universities across the country. The stakes could not be higher for those who treasure free expression, who value true diversity, and

who understand that the right to private conscience is the most fundamental and irreducible of liberties. Those of you who have experienced efforts to repress your thoughts, convictions, and souls now must take a stand on behalf of your foundational rights as human beings. For too long, the guardians of campus orthodoxy have been permitted to twist the meanings of “tolerance” and “inclusion,” denying both to persons of faith. It is time to name and resist campus leaders who tolerate only those who bow before their chosen gods and who include only those who worship at their particular ideological shrines.

It is no exaggeration to say that the future of American freedom is at stake in the struggle for campus liberty and legal equality. America's students cannot learn to respect freedom if they participate in—or passively tolerate—tyranny. Today's college campus is tomorrow's public, political, educational, and civic culture. By standing against campus persecution, by fighting the tyranny of enforced orthodoxy and legal inequality, religious individuals and their supporters preserve not only their own consciences, but also the liberty of our entire society.