

'My' Religious Freedom and 'Your' LGBTQ+/First Nations/Non-white/Non-Christian [or whatever group it is that you, not I, belong to] Rights:
Building a More Inclusive Faith Community

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A Response to Grant Havers, Strange Bedfellows: Are Individual Freedoms
Compatible with Group Rights?

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to Dr. Havers's lecture and to say a few words about the important issue of balancing rights and freedoms, especially as part of the Mel Smith Lecture. (Congratulations to Darlene Rowlandson).

I have ten minutes in which to respond to Grant's lecture. I have left much out. Anything I say tonight is offered in the spirit of peace and conciliation. I want to thank all of the speakers in the FRTF series: Darren Provost, Paul Rowe, Janet Epp Buckingham, Earl Phillips, Bob Kuhn, Myron Penner, and Grant Havers. I hold many opinions in common with them, but, on a number of positions, some of us disagree. No matter, I have the greatest respect for all of them and their work in our community and hope my comments tonight reflect that.

To Grant's lecture:

Significantly, Dr. Havers reminds us that Christianity is "the first religion to recognize human equality" (1) and that "if everyone wants their views to be tolerated, they must tolerate the views of others with whom they disagree" (7). His focus on "the current assault on the individual right to free speech, in order to protect marginalized groups from being offended" provides us with one way of viewing state governance of group rights and individual freedoms. He identifies the "attack on the freedom to speak, read, and think as one chooses," creeping even into academia, "the last bastion of free speech," as "a new and disturbing chapter in the history of rights" (7). And he points to the roots of this assault in "Cultural Marxism," also referred to as "critical theory" (if you're a proponent of its principles), or "political correctness" (if you think it's a bunch of hogwash). I think most of us can point to an example of an event or incident where what Dr Havers calls the "prevailing winds of ideological fashion" (7) look much like "blowback."

Consider current events at Western Washington University. There the student group, Assembly for Power and Liberation, has made a long list of demands that include creating a College of Power and Liberation to offer academic programs committed to social justice. They have demanded an Office for Social Transformation, to employ fifteen students, for the purposes of "monitor[ing], document[ing], and archiv[ing] [a whole host of] [all racist, anti- black, transphobic,

cissexist, misogynistic, ableist, homophobic, Islamophobic, xenophobic, anti-semitic], and otherwise] oppressive behavior on campus.”¹ They also spell history as hxstory. Right-wing detractors look with derision at what they call these “Robespierres in training” and their “thoughtcrime investigations.”² Even those on the left are, as Dr Havers asserts, beginning to grasp that “The group rights revolution may end up eating its own” (20). In light of these sorts of events, there is an expressed fear that post-colonial discourse is authoritarian, and as intolerant of dissent as that on the right. The oppressed are beginning to look like oppressors, and we do not like it.

If we can put aside, for a moment, what might appear to be an egregious example of intolerance on one end of the spectrum (and Dr Havers has provided us with other examples), I’d like to consider group rights within the context of TWU. In his lecture Dr Havers argues that: “Group rights are a different kettle of fish [than individual freedoms], since these rights belong to groups. It is my membership within a particular group which determines my rights. It also means that different groups, depending on different criteria, can possess rights which the other groups do not. Group rights, then, enshrine unequal treatment before the law, since not all groups possess the same rights.” (p. 2). And, “In short, GR institutionalize inequality; the rights of one group must trump the rights of another, unlike individual rights. Plus, this intolerance is practiced in the name of tolerance.” (16).

But the right of Trinity Western University to exist as a degree-granting private university, to offer curriculum from a Christian perspective, or Christian perspectives, does NOT reside in individual rights or freedoms, but in the collective group rights of this faith community. In this way we, as a group, have the right to discriminate against hiring those who do not share our faith, or even against hiring those who may share our faith, but might not share particular aspects (let’s call them statements) which we, at one time or another, may deem to be more important than at others. In this way, we as a group have the right to exclude from admittance into our community those who may not share, or may not be certain whether they share, particularly interpreted theological positions that have been or have become perfectly acceptable within a broader evangelical Christian worldview.

As for the larger issue of “identity politics” and “political correctness,” Dr Havers takes a dim view of Will Kymlicka’s post-colonial interpretation of English history and culture in North America. I do have concerns (and I may have misinterpreted this reading, so excuse me if I have) about designating the term “ethnic,” as in “ethnic immigrant groups,” to refer to non-English settlers who arrived after the country’s “founders” (17-18). North America’s European “colonizers” were ethnic immigrants. Even the English (with whom the Scots, Irish,

¹ <http://www.ipetitions.com/petition/students-for-power-and-liberation-demands-wwu>

² Robby Suave, “The College that Wants to Ban History,” <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2016/03/07/the-college-that-wants-to-ban-history.html>

and Welsh do not identify) have an ethnic identity that needs to be understood. Englishness/ whiteness/maleness – these are all identities that need to be defined. They do not exist as essentialist units or forms (to use Plato’s word) against which “ethnicity” (read non-English), “race” (read non-white), or “gender” (read non-male) are constructed. And the European peopling of North America happened within a very particular historical context.

The French had a significantly different relationship with First Nations than the English (or their British kin), something I have no time to discuss. Moreover, seventeenth-century England/Britain, the time period that gave birth to British North America, was hardly an oasis of religious freedom. Dissenters or non-Anglicans – Catholics, Congregationalists (Independents), Baptists, Quakers, and other religious sects – suffered horrendous religious persecution by their own tribe because they refused to acknowledge the supremacy of the Church of England. Even after the Glorious Revolution in 1688 and the Act of Toleration the following year, non-Anglicans continued to suffer at the hands of their fellow Christian citizens. Toleration meant only that. Non-conformists were no longer dragged out of their church services and tossed into prisons (if their church was registered), they were no longer whipped, beaten brutally, or branded – literally – as blasphemers. But they were not permitted full participation in society; they could not attend universities nor hold public office. Many fled, and quite a few were banished; they made their way across the Atlantic to start over again in a place where they sought freedom of religion and conscience. Relationships with the indigenous populations already living in North America, the poor who came as indentured servants, and Africans brought as slaves were complex but it is fair to say that, in many cases, the oppressed became the oppressors. In most cases the power of faith communities was turned against the “other”; in some cases, as in that of the Puritans [that group that sought to purify the church] of Salem, the faith community turned in on itself in a set of religious trials historians are *still* trying to understand.

In English Canada it was not much different. In the jostling of political refugees cast into the Ontario (for sake of ease of understanding) wilderness after the American Revolution, Anglicans settled at the top of the social hierarchy and worked hard to keep non-Anglicans out. It was the long-suffering efforts of multiple Christian faith groups that eventually resulted in a space in which disagreement was no longer equated with disloyalty and in which a more accommodative, inclusive identity came to exist. Even so, there was still much prejudice and discrimination as we know (or should know) in the relationship with Canada’s First Nations, non-Anglo white immigrants, and immigrants who were a colour other than what Crayola used to call “flesh.”

What, you may ask, does any of this have to do with balancing rights and freedoms at TWU? Are we really, as was suggested in a recent issue of the *Mars’ Hill* (“The Invisible Persecution”) “blind and deaf to the presence (and suffering) of [our]

minorities?” Is it possible that the oppressed are acting as oppressors? We could have an entire debate on these questions, and my ten minutes are over (I am almost done).

If we begin with the premise (no matter how much we dislike or disagree it) that all do not FEEL welcome at TWU, but remain committed to a community that many of us have found to be transformational, we must take seriously the example of Christ’s radical hospitality in the way we ACT, not just the way we speak. How do we do that?

First, [and I’m going to use some of those “strange terms that have entered our vocabulary” (8)] we must examine our privilege. Privilege theory is a concept that is over one hundred years old. It began as an academic term, but has moved into common parlance in recent years. It refers to multiple variables of differing importance that determine the rights or advantages we hold within different contexts. Privilege is not necessarily a “bad” thing. For instance, a Christian student has privilege at TWU that they wouldn’t hold at a public university. They know the dialect, are familiar with the rituals and narratives that frame the community, and do not have to be schooled on the culture. But privilege, unrecognized, can lead to thoughtlessness. As one commenter said (this is attributed to David Gaiter, a Canadian game developer): “Privilege is when you think something is not a problem because it’s not a problem to you personally.” In Luke 14(12-14) Jesus said it was easy to play host to relatives, friends, the wealthy because they might repay us. The real test, however, is in playing host to those who may be unlike us.

Being hospitable, or welcoming, practicing respect instead of toleration does not mean that we do not recognize differences that exist in the community. I like the term solidarity as used by feminist theorist Chandra Talpade Mohanty: solidarity does not erase difference. It recognizes difference, but it commits to working across difference towards a common goal. Can we avoid “us” and “them” language? As soon as we say “they want...” or “those people...” we create boundaries; we draw lines of division. Christ stands across all divisions, including boundaries between group rights and individual freedoms. Building a more inclusive community requires courage and commitment from all sides. Creating a community that is clear in its own identity, but respectful of difference and welcoming will take work.

Let me be clear: inclusion is NOT a function of numbers. (We have made some progress!) An inclusive faith community does not exist because “many of our students are not Christians,” or because an increasing number of students self-identify as First Nations, or because a lot of international students attend TWU, or because “several LGBTQ students attend the university and TWU does not inquire about sexual orientation during the admissions process” (“The Invisible Persecution”). We pride ourselves on being Jesus in our community. Do we SEE Jesus in the faces of every person who enters our community? In Matthew 25:40 Christ said, “Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.”

There are many things that appear to be beyond our control. Courts are making decisions that affect us, the provincial government has made and could make decisions that affect us, and the media portrays TWU as a place many of us hardly recognize. None of those institutions make TWU a community. WE make TWU a community. WE choose whether we will make space in this community, or whether we will not. In the classrooms, in the dorms, in d-groups, the collegia, extra-curricular activities, and any of the other spaces that are populated by the people of our community, we will decide whether to act on, not just talk about, the biblical command to [as Dr Havers says], “put aside the natural instinct to love only our tribe and group and instead love those whom we do not want to love” (4).