

A Call to Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton

Everyone, especially those in the academic world and the leaders of the African-American community in the United States, must stop tolerating the intolerable. Those leaders should make their voices heard on this issue. The precious principle of free speech does not and must not justify expressions of hatred, discrimination, racism, or the virus of antisemitism.

The latest problem on this issue comes from Oberlin College, the small private, highly rated liberal arts institution in Ohio. Oberlin, founded in 1833 by Presbyterian ministers who were advocates of the anti-slavery and abolition cause, has a great history of which it can be justly proud. From its beginning it has been one of the country's major educational institutions devoted to progressive causes. It was the first college to admit African-Americans, in 1844, and to grant degrees to women, in 1862. In recent times it has adopted a liberal attitude to sexuality, providing free or discounted condoms to the student body, and allowing students to room with students of any gender.

Understandably, the Oberlin student body, in addition to enjoying the Conservatory of Music, the oldest operating one in the country, is more attracted to political science than to science, mathematics, or engineering. It was therefore only a little surprising that in May 2015 the students exhibited their political engagement by taking over the college administration building to protest an increase in tuition fees.

But it is much more surprising and disturbing that Oberlin should be a locale for expositions of ignorance, bigotry, hatred and antisemitism. In November 2015 the Black Students

Union complained of the “cultural appropriation of ethnic foods and cultural insensitivity” in the dining hall, which in fact specialized in General Tso’s chicken, a dish created in the United States. With the same kind of twisted logic, the active pro-Palestinian students linked the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions of Israel movement to that of “Black Lives Matter.”

Those pro-Palestinian students went further by building an “apartheid wall” in front of the college library, while they or others painted Nazi swastikas on the Jewish Center and Jewish fraternities on campus.

Bigotry and prejudice, not to mention abysmal display of ignorance, at Oberlin reached an all point low with messages emanating from a faculty member named Joy Karega (Joilynn Karega-Mason), an assistant professor of rhetoric and composition. Her publications appear rather sparse, apart from her work project, presumably based on her dissertation at the University of Louisville in 2014 on the Black Liberation Front Movement International, an organization at Michigan State University. Nevertheless, the Black Students Union demanded she be given tenure.

It is difficult to know the full extent of her fulminations because she has recently restricted access to her posts on social media accounts. But enough is known to warrant raising the question of how she could have been appointed to and now maintained at a prestigious college like Oberlin.

Some of Karega’s posts on Facebook are known. She informed us a number of times in January and February 2016 that Israel was behind the major terrorist attacks in the world, including 9/11 in the United States, carried out by “Israelis and Zionist Jews,” and the Charlie Hebdo massacre in Paris. The Israeli Mossad, helped by the CIA, had created ISIS, the Islamic Caliphate, to initiate the attacks and unleashed them on France.

Karega had already posted a graphic showing an ISIS militant, with a Star of David tattoo and letters JSIL (a Jewish version of ISIS) on his arm, taking off a mask of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. The text stated, "France wants to Free Palestine? Time for a false flag." She also told us that Jews controlled President Barack Obama, and that Jacob Rothschild controls "your government."

It is particularly disconcerting that in all this, and presumably for protection of her academic career in spite of her virulent antisemitism, she played the race card. In barely comprehensible language in a message of February 26, 2016 she played her hand. She told us that she had a lot to say "about the kinds of intimidation and silencing tactics that are rhetorically enacted in digital space...and how common it is for Black women who are early in their career on the tenure track as part of the professoriate, to be the prime targets for these kinds of activities and practices."

So far this statement, one that can be reasonably regarded as a form of blackmail, has prevented any "intimidation and silencing tactics." The President of Oberlin, Marvin Krislov, has explained he is a practicing Jew, grandson of an Orthodox rabbi, and had lost some of his family in the Holocaust. As a political scientist with a law degree and as a Rhodes scholar at Oxford, Krislov could not understand how anyone could question the existence and horrors of the Holocaust.

After Karega had been criticized, Krislov defended the principles of academic freedom and freedom of speech as meaningful responses to prejudice. He therefore has taken no action on Karega's actions that he said were in accord with the College's mission. Everyone can agree that academic freedom is indispensable to, indeed the buttress of, higher education. Free inquiry is expected to promote expansion of knowledge. Krislov explained that freedom of expression "enables Oberlin's faculty and students to think deeply about and to engage in frank, open discussion of ideas that some may

find deeply offensive.”

With due respect, this is an inadequate and incorrect position. What is missing in Krislov’s defense of Karega are two things. In spite of his avowed Jewishness he seemed to have made no attempt to condemn the evil antisemitism of so many of her statements. Similarly, he ignored her willful and deliberate distortion of facts about who was responsible for terrorist acts. It is irresponsible to attribute “open discussion of ideas” to Karega’s ignorant version of the massacres of 9/11 and Charlie Hebdo.

President Krislov’s position is unfortunately symptomatic of the liberal tendency to be tolerant of the intolerant, especially when expressed by or supposed to be on behalf of an ethnic minority. The academic discipline does depend on honest and true discussion of ideas. It should exclude virulent prejudice, bigotry, and antisemitism. Oberlin College knows better and should act accordingly. So should also the well known African-American leaders who should make their voice heard and ensure that their own cause is not besmirched by anti-Semitism.