

October 3, 2009

President Gearan,

This letter is a response to Daniel McGowan's defense of Holocaust deniers published in the *Finger Lakes Times* on September 27. The content of the essay and its publication on the eve of Yom Kippur was appalling. We are writing to you because of the disgrace to Hobart and William Smith caused by McGowan's continued use of the institutional imprimatur and his honorary title of "Emeritus Professor" to lend credence in disseminating his personal beliefs. He has every right as a private citizen to hold and spew forth whatever beliefs he may happen to have, but we ask you to prevent the use of his title and the name of Hobart and William Smith from contributing to its effects in the future.

It should be clear that while McGowan is claiming to raise legitimate historical and free speech issues, Holocaust denial has a history of being no more than thinly veiled anti-Semitism. When historians talk about the Holocaust what they mean is that approximately six million Jews and several millions of others were killed in an intentional and systematic fashion by the Nazis using a number of different means, including death by shooting and in gas chambers. This is the position held universally by scholars. The Holocaust deniers reject the historicity of the Holocaust based on three types of assertions. They reject the number of 6 million, the existence of killing camps, and the element of intentionality.

Professor McGowan's article is an example of denying the reality of the most studied and documented event in history. Holocaust denial carries absolutely no weight among academic scholars in any field whatsoever. Additionally, denying the undisputed facts of the holocaust is not a way to show support for the Palestinians. For example, his argument denying the intentionality of the Nazi's execution of Jews is that there is not sufficient proof that it was designed to exterminate the Jewish population. Rather, he asserts, it may have been merely a program of "ethnic cleansing." The suggestion that this somehow makes it less morally reprehensible speaks for itself, as we all know that the term "ethnic cleansing" was introduced to make genocide sound more palatable.

Professor McGowan's position is a classic case of blaming the victims for their own victimization. Primo Levi wrote in *The Drowned and the Saved* that what he most feared was echoed in a remark by one of his SS guards: That if he somehow managed to live through this hell no one would believe his descriptions of Auschwitz. Sadly, for some, that day has arrived.

Freedom of speech is a right for citizens in a democracy that should be vigorously protected, especially when we find the content of that speech to be abhorrent. Colleges and universities have an educational obligation to encourage scholarship that reflects

perspectives outside the mainstream of public political discourse, and we encourage that. Hate speech, on the other hand, is a trickier issue for campuses to wrestle with because while free speech has a special value, we have a duty to protect members of our diverse community from unsupported vitriol being espoused under the name of our colleges and its professors. We faculty of all persuasions, Buddhists, Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Jews, and atheists, are deeply offended and also share a special concern about the impact of such hateful messages (and its association with us) upon our Jewish students, staff, and faculty.

Professor McGowan's actions do not meet our expectation of minimally rational and minimally humane discourse. As human beings who see the transparent motivation and effects of such writing, we are deeply disturbed and saddened to see a Hobart and William Smith title attached to it. We therefore request the removal of Professor McGowan's honorary title of "Emeritus Professor."

Sincerely,

Scott Brophy, Professor of Philosophy

Michael Dobkowski, Professor of Religious Studies

Khuram Hussain, Assistant Professor of Education

Steven Lee, Professor of Philosophy

James MaKinster, Associate Professor of Education

Lilian Sherman, Assistant Professor of Education