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Think Piece
Racism, Free Speech and the College Campus
by Tim Wise

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Mr. Wise is a noted white anti-racist activist. The following is a December 23, 2005 essay, followed by a December 29 review by Mr. Wise of comments generated by the original piece. Both can be found at www.timwise.org.

As has been the case every year for as long as I can recall, an American college campus is once again embroiled in controversy over the expression of racism in its hallowed halls, and what it may seek to do in response.

This time the place is Bellarmine University, a Catholic college in Louisville, Kentucky, where, for the past several months, freshman Andrei Chira has been sporting an armband for "Blood and Honour" – a British-based neo-Nazi and skinhead-affiliated musical movement, that calls for "white pride" and white power. Created originally as a magazine by Ian Stuart of the Hitler-friendly and openly fascist band, Skrewdriver, the Blood and Honour "movement" promotes bands that sing about racial cleansing and the deportation, if not extermination, of blacks and Jews. Blood and Honour's symbol, similar to the Nazi swastika, is that of the South African white supremacist movement, and is featured prominently on Chira's armband.

Chira, for his part, seems more confused than dangerous. All in the same breath he insists he is not a Nazi or neo-Nazi, but that he *is* a National Socialist (the term for which Nazi is shorthand). He insists he is not a white supremacist, a racist, or anti-Jewish, yet claims to be a supporter of the American National Socialist Movement (NSM), which calls for citizenship to be limited to those who are non-Jewish, heterosexual whites, and which group praises Hitler on its website.

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All of which raises the larger question, which is not so much whether or not Chira should have the freedom to be an ignorant lout, but rather, how did someone so incapable of evincing even a modicum of intelligible (or merely internally consistent) thought, get admitted to a good college like Bellarmine in the first place? Are there no standards anymore?

Naturally, the debate has now begun to turn on the issue of free speech: Does the University have the right to sanction Chira or force him to remove the armband, or do his First Amendment rights trump concerns about the feelings of students of color, Jews (yes there are some at the Catholic school, both students and professors), and others who are made to feel unsafe by a neo-Nazi symbol?

It's a tug-of-war that has divided American higher education for years, with some schools passing restrictive codes limiting language or symbols that express open racial or religious hostility, and others taking a more hands-off approach. Bellarmine has remained uncommitted to any particular course of action. The University President has spoken in defense of Chira's free speech rights (and of the principle, more broadly), and has called for a committee to study the issue and determine what kind of policy the school should adopt to deal with hate speech.

Buzz around campus has been split between free speech absolutists on the one hand (who seem to predominate), and those concerned about the way in which racist symbols might intimidate and further marginalize already isolated students, faculty and staff of color, on the other. Faculty have sniped at one another from both sides of the issue, as have students, and a group of about a dozen students recently launched a sit-in outside the office of the Vice-President for Student Affairs, to insist on the inviolability of free speech rights.

As students prepare to return for the spring semester, there is little doubt but that the issue will dominate time and energy on the Bellarmine campus in months to come, and that how the school resolves the issue will come to inform other colleges with regard to their own hate speech policies. Having spoken recently at Bellarmine, and having met dozens of conscientious students and faculty there, concerned about addressing racism, I would like to take this opportunity to chime in, both regarding the existing free speech debate, and the larger (and I think more important) issue, which is how best to respond to racism, whether at a college or in society more broadly.

To be honest, I have never found the main arguments of either the free speech absolutists or those who support hate speech restrictions to be particularly persuasive.

On the one hand, the free speech folks ignore several examples of speech limitations that we live with everyday, and that most all would think legitimate. So, we are not free to slander others, to print libelous information about others, to engage in false advertising, to harass others, to print and disseminate personal information about others (such as their confidential medical or financial records), to engage in speech that seeks to further a criminal conspiracy, to speak in a way that creates a hostile work environment (as with sexual harassment), to engage in plagiarized speech, or to lie under oath by way of dishonest speech. In other words, First Amendment absolutism is not only inconsistent with Constitutional jurisprudence; it is also a moral and practical absurdity, as these and other legitimate limitations make fairly apparent.

Secondly, the free speech rights of racists, by definition, must be balanced against the equal protection rights of those targeted by said speech. If people have the right to be educated or employed in non-hostile environments (and the courts and common sense both suggest they do), and if these rights extend to both public and private institutions (and they do), then to favor the free speech rights of racists, over and above the right to equal protection for their targets, is to trample the latter for the sake of the former. In other words, there is always a balance that must be struck, and an argument can be made that certain kinds of racist speech create such a hostile and intimidating environment that certain limits would be not only acceptable, but

required, as a prerequisite for equal protection of the laws, and equal opportunity.

So, for example, face-to-face racist invective could be restricted, as could racist speech that carried with it the implied threat of violence. Whether or not a neo-Nazi symbol of a movement that celebrates Adolph Hitler qualifies in that regard, is the issue to be resolved; but certainly it should not be seen as obvious that any and all speech is protected, just because of the right to free speech in the abstract.

Not to mention, does anyone honestly believe that Bellarmine, a Catholic school, would allow (or that most of the free speech absolutists would insist that they *should* allow) students to attend class with t-shirts that read: "Hey Pope Benedict: Kiss my pro-choice Catholic ass!" or "My priest molested me and all I got from my diocese was this lousy t-shirt?" No doubt such garments would be seen as disruptive, and precisely because they do not truly express a viewpoint or any substantive content, but rather, simply toss rhetorical grenades for the sake of shock value (likely part of Chira's motivation too).

Chira's armband, in that regard, is quite different from a research paper, dissertation, or even a speech given on a soapbox, or article written for his own newspaper, if he had one: namely, unlike these things, the armband is not a rebuttable argument, nor does it put forth a cogent position to which "more speech" can be the obvious solution. It provokes an emotional response only, and little else.

At the same time, the arguments of those who would move to ban hate speech have also typically fallen short of the mark, at least in my estimation.

To begin with, speech codes have always seemed the easy way out: the least costly, most self-righteous, but ultimately least effective way to address racism. First, such codes only target, by necessity, the most blatant forms of racism – the overtly hateful, bigoted and hostile forms of speech embodied in slurs or perhaps neo-Nazi symbolism – while leaving in place, also by necessity, the legality of more nuanced, high-minded, and ultimately more dangerous forms of racism. So racist books like *The Bell Curve*, which argues that blacks are genetically inferior to whites and Asians, obviously would not be banned under hate speech codes (nor should they be), but those racists who were too stupid to couch their biases in big words and footnotes would be singled out for attention: in which case, we'd be punishing not racism, *per se*, or even racist speech, but merely the inarticulate expression of the same.

In turn, this kind of policy would then create a false sense of security, as institutions came to believe they had really done something important, even as slicker forms of racism remained popular and unaddressed. Furthermore, such policies would also reinforce the false and dangerous notion that racism is limited to the blatant forms being circumscribed by statute, or that racists are all obvious and open advocates of fascism, rather than the oftentimes professional, respectable, and destructive leaders of our institutions: politicians, cops, and bosses, among others.

Secondly, hate speech codes reinforce the common tendency to view racism on the purely individual level – as a personality problem in need of adjustment, or at least censure – as opposed to an institutional arrangement, whereby colleges, workplaces and society at large manifest racial inequity of treatment and opportunity, often without any bigotry whatsoever.

So, for example, racial inequity in the job market is perpetuated not only, or even mostly by overt racism – though that too is still far too common – but rather by way of the "old boy's networks," whereby mostly white, middle class and above, and male networks of friends, neighbors and associates pass along information about job openings to one another. And this they do, not because they seek to deliberately keep others out, but simply because those are the people they know, live around, and consider their friends. The result, of course, is that people of color and women of all colors remain locked out of full opportunity.

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Likewise, students seeking to get into college are given standardized tests (bearing little relationship to academic ability), which are then used to determine in large measure where (or even *if*) they will go to college at all; this, despite the fact that these students have received profoundly unstandardized educations, have been exposed to unstandardized resources, unstandardized curricula, and have come from unstandardized and dramatically unequal backgrounds. As such, lower income students and students of color – who disproportionately come out on the short end of the resource stick – are prevented from obtaining true educational equity with their white and more affluent peers. And again, this would have nothing to do with overt bias, let alone the presence of neo-Nazis at the Educational Testing Service or in the admissions offices of any given school.

In other words, by focusing on the overt and obvious forms of racism, hate speech codes distract us from the structural and institutional changes necessary to truly address racism and white supremacy as larger social phenomena. And while we could, in theory, both limit racist speech and respond to institutional racism, doing the former almost by definition takes so much energy (if for no other reason than the time it takes to defend the effort from Constitutional challenges), that getting around to the latter never seems to follow in practice. Not to mention, by passing hate speech codes, the dialogue about racism inevitably (as at Bellarmine) gets transformed into a discussion about free speech and censorship, thereby fundamentally altering the focus of our attentions, and making it all the less likely that our emphasis will be shifted back to the harder and more thoroughgoing work of addressing structural racial inequity.

Perhaps most importantly, even to the extent we seek to focus on the overt manifestations of racism, putting our emphasis on ways to limit speech implies that there aren't other ways to respond to overt bias that might be more effective and more creative, and engage members of the institution in a more thoroughgoing and important discussion about individual responsibilities to challenge bigotry.

So instead of banning racist armbands, how much better might it be to see hundreds of Bellarmine students donning their own come spring: armbands saying things like: "Fuck Nazism," "Fuck Racism," or, for that matter, "Fuck You, Andrei" (hey, free speech is free speech, after all).

That a lot of folks would be more offended by the word "fuck," both in this article and on an armband, than by the political message of Chira's wardrobe accessory, of course, says a lot about what's wrong in this culture, but that's a different column for a different day. The point here is that such messages would be a good way to test how committed people at Bellarmine really are to free speech, and would also send a strong message that racism will be met and challenged *en masse*, and not just via anonymous e-mails.

In other words, if Chira is free to make people of color uncomfortable, then others are sure as shit free to do the same to him and others like him. Otherwise, freedom of speech becomes solely a shield for members of majority groups to hide behind, every time they seek to bash others.

Instead of banning hate speech, how much better might it be if everyone at Bellarmine who insists that they don't agree with Chira, but only support his rights to free speech, isolated and ostracized him: refusing to speak to him, refusing to sit near him, refusing to associate with him in any way, shape or form. That too would be exercising free speech after all, since free speech also means the freedom not to speak, in this case, to a jackass like Andrei Chira.

Instead of banning hate speech, how much better might it be for Bellarmine University to institutionalize practices and policies intended to screen out fascist bottom-feeders like Chira in the first place? After all, Bellarmine, like any college can establish any number of requirements for students seeking to gain admission, or staff seeking to work at the school, or faculty desiring a teaching gig. In addition to scholarly credentials, why not require applicants – whether for student slots or jobs – to explain how they intend to further the cause of racial diversity and equity at Bellarmine?

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And before I'm accused of advocating the larding up of the school's mission with politically correct platitudes, perhaps it would be worth noting that these values are already part of Bellarmine's Mission and Vision statements to begin with. To wit, the school's Mission statement, which reads:

"Bellarmine University is an independent, Catholic university in the public interest, serving the region, the nation and the world by providing an educational environment of academic excellence and respect for the intrinsic value and dignity of each person. We foster international awareness in undergraduate and graduate programs in the liberal arts and professional studies where talented, diverse persons of all faiths and many ages, nations and cultures develop the intellectual, moral and professional competencies for lifelong learning, leadership, service to others, careers, and responsible, values-based, caring lives."

And this, from the school's Vision statement:

"Bellarmine University aspires to be the innovative, premier independent Catholic liberal arts university in Kentucky and the region for preparing diverse persons to become dynamic leaders to serve, live and work in a changing, global community."

In other words, the school's entire purpose is consistent with the search for diversity and equity, and entirely inconsistent with the racism and Nazism of persons like Chira. So why shouldn't the school seek to ensure that only persons who adhere to, buy into, and are prepared to further the purpose of the institution itself, are admitted or hired to work there? Once there, individuals may indeed have free speech rights that protect even their most obnoxious of views, but that says nothing about the ability of the school to take steps that will make it much harder for such individuals to enter the institution to begin with.

Making a proven commitment to antiracist values a prerequisite for entry (and perhaps requiring some form of training in these issues or antiracist service project in order to graduate or receive tenure or promotion) would go far towards operationalizing the college's lofty (but thusfar mostly impotent) mission, and would make controversies such as the present one far less frequent or relevant.

If Bellarmine is serious about stamping out racism, it is this kind of institutional change — which would both limit the presence of racists and increase the numbers of people of color and white antiracist allies, by definition — that they should adopt. No more platitudes, no more promises, and no more unnecessary debates about free speech. Create an antiracist culture from the get-go, by expanding affirmative action, diversifying the curricula, and using admissions and hiring criteria that sends a clear signal: namely, you may have free speech, but so do *we*; and we are exercising ours to tell you that you are not welcome here.

Sadly, perhaps the most important missing ingredient in the struggle to uproot racism, is white outrage: not at those who challenge racism (oh we've plenty of anger for them, typically), but rather, at those who are white like us, and whose racism we listen to with amusement, more so than indignation.

So, for example, notice how the free speech supporters wax eloquent about the importance of upholding Chira's right to be a racist prick, but they evince almost no hostility towards he and his message, beyond the obligatory throw-away line: "I completely reject his views, but will fight for his right to express them." In other words, they are far more worked up about the possibility (however slight it appears to be) that the Administration may sanction the Nazi, than they are about the fact that *there is a Nazi on their campus in the first place*. Which brings up the question: does Nazism not bother them that much? Or have they confused the valid concept of free speech with the completely invalid notion that one shouldn't even condemn racists, out of some misplaced fealty to their rights (which notion of course relinquishes one's *own* right to speak back, and forcefully, to assholes like Chira)?

I long for the day when whites will get as angry at one of our number supporting bigotry and genocidal political movements, as we do at those who denounce the bigots and suggest that the right of students of color to be educated in a non-hostile environment is just as important as the right to spout putrid inanities.

What's more, I long for the day when whites stage sit-ins to demand a more diverse and equitable college environment for students of color (which currently is threatened by rollbacks of affirmative action, for example), just as quickly as we stage them to defend free speech for fascists, which, at Bellarmine at least, shows no signs of being endangered, so quick has the Administration been to defend Chira's liberties.

In the final analysis, when whites take it upon ourselves to make racists and Nazis like Chira feel unwelcome at our colleges and in our workplaces, by virtue of making clear our own views in opposition to them, all talk of hate speech codes will become superfluous. Where anti-racists are consistent, persistent, and uncompromising, and where anti-racist principles are woven into the fabric of our institutions, there will be no need to worry about people like Chira any longer.

Racism, Free Speech and the College Campus – Part Two:

Bigots' Personal Growth Shouldn't Come at Expense of Others

December 29, 2005

Recently, I published an essay concerning racism on college campuses and the issue of free speech. The commentary was prompted by news that Andrei Chira, a freshman at Bellarmine University, in Louisville, has been wearing a neo-Nazi armband around the school for the better part of the Fall semester.

In the body of the piece, I sought to do three things.

First, I wanted to present the facts of the case at Bellarmine, and describe the conflict between those who oppose any limits to free expression, and those who feel certain types of hateful speech may be so intimidating to students of color (as an isolated and small minority), that certain limits might be acceptable, in the form of restrictive hate speech codes.

Secondly, I sought to examine the free speech issue, ultimately noting that I find neither the arguments of the free speech absolutists, nor the hate speech code advocates entirely persuasive.

To the free speech absolutists, I pointed out that there are many forms of speech limits we live with, and virtually all support (bans on harassment, libel, slander, perjury, plagiarism, etc). Furthermore, I tried to explain that rights always must be balanced (in this case, free speech and the First Amendment against equal protection and the Fourteenth), so that certain types of speech, such as one-on-one racist invective or speech that carries an implied threat of violence can obviously be restricted without running afoul of personal liberties we rightly wish to protect.

To those advocating speech code restrictions, I pointed out that such efforts are cheap, easy, but ultimately not the best way to fight racism. First, they reduce racism to interpersonal conflict (rather than an institutional problem reinforced by power imbalances), and encourage the belief that racism is only to be found at the extremes: manifested by those who use racial slurs or wear Nazi symbols, for example. Passing such restrictions allows institutional elites to think they've done something, even when, in truth, the most pernicious (and often more subtle) forms of racism persist: old boy's networks that determine hiring, or unequal educational resources that constrain higher ed access to begin with.

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And finally, I sought to present an alternative to either hate speech restrictions or merely doing nothing. Specifically, I noted that if Chira has free speech, and has the right to offend and make persons of color uncomfortable, then so too do others. As such, Bellarmine students should exercise *their* free speech, by wearing anti-racist, anti-Nazi, or even anti-Andrei Chira armbands. Likewise, they should refuse to speak to him or associate with him in any way (after all, free speech also means the freedom *not* to speak). Lastly, Bellarmine should operationalize their mission and vision statements (both of which stress the importance of cultural diversity and human dignity in a global environment), by requiring persons seeking to attend school or work there to demonstrate a commitment to racial equity and justice in order to enter the institution, or once there, to graduate, be promoted, or receive tenure.

To these suggestions, and the larger argument, I received many responses, most of which were favorable, but some of which seemed to have missed my point altogether. Several apparently thought I had called for speech restrictions, and proceeded to lecture me about the slippery slope that might follow such mandates. Since most of my readers are fairly liberal or left to begin with, these typically sounded the alarm that communists or anarchists might be next – prohibited from expressing their views because they would offend others.

Of course, in point of fact, I had not endorsed speech codes or restrictions on hate speech (except in the fairly obvious cases of one-on-one harassment or invective, which no rational person would want to defend, and speech that includes a threat of violence). I did not take a position as to what should happen with Andre Chira, in terms of his right to wear the armband, and generally, to be a racist ass. If anything, my endorsement of alternatives to speech codes at the end of the piece suggests I am not a fan of speech restrictions, even if I reject the absolutists' claims about slippery slopes as horribly simplistic.

Among the litany of responses I received, however, one stood out for its depth of thought, its well argued counterpoint to my own position, and the desire on the part of the author to engage the issues from the perspective of how best to address racism, which, after all, is the primary concern here. As such, and despite disagreeing with her position, I felt it would be useful to give voice to her criticisms, and then explain why I feel that my suggestions in the original piece remain valid.

The person who took issue with my original article, made several arguments, which roughly can be synthesized to the following:

1. Andrei Chira is young, clueless and insecure, and like many such persons, looking for scapegoats and an identity for his own unexamined rage;
2. Although this hardly excuses his actions, it suggests he is in need of education, not ostracism, as I recommended, or the donning of armbands directed at him personally, or hostility more generally. After all, to further marginalize him (in his own mind at least) and to shame him for his views, might only generate more of the hostility and rage that animated his original gravitation to neo-Nazism, and thereby make his racism worse; and finally,
3. For Bellarmine (or other schools) to restrict access to people like Chira in the first place (by making a commitment to equity and diversity a qualification for admission) would only prevent racists from being exposed to alternative ways of thinking, thereby allowing them to remain ignorant, and thus, more dangerous to the society at large.

Because the person penning this response was making a heartfelt (and I would say quite reasonable) argument about what is, and is not, the best way to fight racism, it is important to engage her concerns. After all, if my suggestions would, on balance, make things worse, then obviously as a committed antiracist activist, I would want to rethink them. But having thought about the concerns expressed above, I feel there are a multitude of problems with the "educate don't ostracize" position being put forth by the person in question.

Patience and Education at Whose Expense?

To begin with, even as we acknowledge that persons like Chira suffer from a profound ignorance, and that it is important for such persons to have that ignorance challenged with wisdom, this truism yet begs the question: At whose expense should Chira's education come?

So, for example, should Chira's need for a guiding and patient hand to help him work through his rage, stupidity or whatever, be thought of as more important than – or even equally as important as – the right of students, staff and faculty of color to be able to work and go to school in environments free from overt forms of racist hostility? In other words, even to the extent we agree that it would be best – all things equal – for us to re-educate Chira and not ostracize him or shame him, to what extent should persons of color be expected to bear the weight of this re-education process?

I have long agreed that it is important for those of us who are white to be patient and even forgiving towards other whites (and ourselves) for falling into racist patterns of thought: after all, everything in our culture encourages exactly that direction. But there is a difference between exhibiting that patience and forgiveness, when the only person from whom it requires sacrifice is oneself, and, on the other hand, demanding that same patience and forgiveness from others – in this case, the targets of Chira's racism. Asking folks of color at Bellarmine to suffer fools (whether gladly or not), and to put their own feelings of insecurity and even danger on the back burner while we caring white folks try to fix one of our lost flock – one who attends classes with them, after all, and who lives in their dorms – well, that seems like a bit much to me.

This is made all the more true by the possibility – and even likelihood – that if folks like Chira are allowed to spout racism *and* avoid ostracism when they do so, out of concern for not shaming him into being an even bigger jackass, people of color at schools like Bellarmine may leave the institution, unsure that whites there are really concerned about their safety or fears about racism. Alternately, other folks of color may refuse to apply, enroll or attend at all. Thus, our heartfelt efforts to educate Chira and not drive him out (or others like him), would likely result in an even smaller number and percentage of people of color attending mostly white schools, thereby sacrificing *their* educational access and opportunities for the sake of *his*. That such a result would be exactly the goal of white supremacists – less black and brown folks around – shouldn't be lost on us here, and the irony of obtaining an institutionally racist result, even as we try and cure one individual of his own personal racism, should give anyone pause who thinks that this would be the best direction in which we should move.

Saving Individual Racists or Reducing Institutional Racism?

As for the suggestion that adopting an antiracist criteria for admission to the University, or for obtaining a job there would result in merely "preaching to the choir," while leaving racists to their own devices, unlikely to be exposed to the healing balm of higher learning (a legitimate concern expressed by the individual who wrote to me), there are a few shortcomings with regard to this argument.

First, such a criteria or screening process (or requirement that graduating or receiving tenure requires antiracist training or some form of service project) would, almost by definition, boost the numbers and percentages of folks of color on the campus. After all, such persons are likely to have firm commitments to diversity and equity, and to have given serious thought as to how to move such goals forward. In other words, by definition, such a criteria would result in a diminution of white campus hegemony, and thus, again, by definition, result in a reduction in institutional racism and white supremacy.

What this suggests, is that even if screening out racists removed one more opportunity to educate them, as individuals, away from racism (a fair and essentially true proposition), such screening would at the same time guarantee a reduction in institutional racism, which surely must rank as a more impactful problem, in both

quantitative and qualitative terms. So that even if one accepts as true the concern expressed above, one could still rightly conclude that it is more important to reduce institutional inequity and racism at a given college, than to ensure that one individual person is able to matriculate there, and perhaps become a better person in the process.

Additionally, such a screening process or antiracist requirement would increase the numbers of antiracist white allies on the campus, as opposed to either racist whites or those who've never given the subject much thought or concern. This, in turn, would produce something of an incubator for developing antiracist strategies, in this case in Louisville, but potentially elsewhere too. Such an environment would allow for the development of a stronger cadre of antiracists, and as such, might be seen as more than balancing out whatever lost opportunities obtain vis-a-vis people like Chira. The question is whether it is more important to "save" Chira, or to develop a setting in which antiracist whites (or those willing to become antiracists) can grow, learn and become better allies to people of color?

The Difference Between Hate Speech and Mere Ignorance

While it is absolutely vital to provide the antiracist counterweight and balance to whatever racism people like Chira are ingesting, the question of where and when such weight needs to be provided – and at what point it's simply too late to prioritize this goal, however otherwise valid it may be – remains on the table. So while we must surely push for this kind of antiracist "character" education to be part of the K-12 curriculum, hoping to deal with such overt racism once a student has become an adult and entered college is considerably more problematic.

Perhaps if the racism in question were of the standard, garden-variety type (or even of the relatively highbrow pseudo-scientific brand, which can nonetheless be answered by better science), providing that counterweight might not be too much of a burden or threat to people of color. But when we're talking about racism of the vicious, Hitler-worshipping type, in which there is no cogent argument being made, beyond "whites are the master race," blacks are "mud-people," and Jews should be exterminated, it's hard to believe that a college either can, or should be expected, to turn one back from the precipice of their own hateful psychological abyss.

At the very least, if we conclude that free speech requires the school and its community members to indulge such sickness, we certainly should not also take away (or criticize) their power to shame the hater, ridicule him, or make him feel like the unacceptable outcast he is. Again, the question is not about Chira's rights alone, but also the rights of others at the school to exercise their free speech to isolate him, and make clear their own revulsion at his views, until he either stops acting out, or leaves.

It is worth noting here that Chira's particular form of racist speech – the brandishing of a neo-Nazi symbol – or certain other forms, like the use of overt racial slurs, are all quite different from some of the milder, albeit offensive kinds of racist discourse that typically takes place on campuses, and which can best be addressed by way of re-education efforts.

So, for example, every year it seems as though at least one (and usually several) colleges have a "blackface incident," in which ignorant white kids smear greasepaint on their faces so as to appear black. Each time, the perpetrators find this stunt – the viciously racist history of which they know nothing at all (because of course we don't teach about those kinds of things in school) – to be hilarious, even an example of bonding with their several "black friends." (Seriously, this was said by several young women at Stetson University, in Deland, Florida this fall, when they dressed up like black basketball players).

As infuriating as such displays of stupidity are, it can be fairly said that in almost every case, those engaged in the act are truly, purely ignorant; this, as opposed to persons who identify openly with Hitlerism. Even if one

doesn't fully understand the vagaries of National Socialism – what it means, what it meant, and what was done in its name – it is simply not conceivable that anyone who had reached the age of eighteen would not be aware of the basic core of ideas being endorsed by embracing its symbols. And surely one would have to know how flaunting such a symbol would make someone feel who was a person of color, or Jewish, for example.

So while it is likely that an otherwise non-bigoted person whose ignorance led them to don blackface or commit some similarly asinine act of micro-level racism, could be changed for the better by educational efforts aimed at filling in the gaps in their knowledge, the neo-Nazi is not merely ignorant. Chira may say that his identification with National Socialism is merely because of his support for national health care and a good forestry program (yes, he does say this), but if we believe him, we are considerably more stupid than he is. To the extent he says such a thing he is not merely a racist, but also a liar – both of which things rise to the level of character flaws serious enough to justify his being ostracized and vilified by any and everyone on the Bellarmine campus.

The Value of Scorn and Rebuke

It's also worth noting that, on occasion, being stigmatized really does work to change behavior, if not one's core feelings and beliefs. Most people, for good or bad, tend to conform to strongly held and communicated social norms, and even bend their behavior to fit these norms. While we may lament conformity in many cases – indeed, in many areas of life we desperately need people to be more questioning of socially accepted "norms" of behavior – in the sense that most people conform to reining in overt manifestations of racist bigotry (something they wouldn't have done even forty years ago), conformity can only be seen as a blessing. If institutions send a clear message that bigots will be seen and treated as rejects – friendless, and undeserving of understanding or compassion until they cease engaging in the behavior that is so injurious to others – many persons so ostracized would indeed change their ways. Granted, they might remain racist internally, but they will be inclined to keep things to themselves, which, after all, is really the primary thing the victims of racism care about.

Which raises the next question: namely, is a person who so cavalierly dismisses the feelings of others – such that they would outwardly identify with a movement that endorses the oppression and even extermination of entire groups of people – already such an anti-social personality that they are beyond the point of being transformed solely by exposure to an especially good sociology professor? Or at least, might they be so abnormally wired so as to make such a conversion experience exceedingly difficult, and surely more of a project than any college can be expected to undertake on its own?

If Chira is *not* an antisocial personality, he will care what others think and may indeed be inclined to change when challenged and made to understand that his views make him a pariah. If he *is* an antisocial personality, such that he doesn't care what others think (or even enjoys upsetting people in this way) then he is not likely to change or grow in response to patiently dispensed education, any more than the schoolyard bully is likely to alter behavior because someone sits him down and tells him that there are better ways to deal with anger than by fighting.

Conclusion: The Importance of Choosing Sides

At the end of the day, schools have a right, and more, an obligation to define their missions and operationalize those missions in the policies, practices and procedures they employ. In fact, a failure to define one's mission clearly, and then hew policies to that mission invites the devolution of higher ed to little more than a business, whose mission becomes getting higher and higher marks in the U.S. News college rankings, and thereby bringing in more alumni contributions, government research contracts, and elite students. Too often schools develop lofty missions but then do nothing to make those missions real in practice: so they preach diversity,

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equity, and even social justice, but ignore those concepts in their day-to-day operations. As such, they end up with people like Andrei Chira, on occasion: people who have never seen the mission, been asked about it, or been forced to explain – as a condition of their acceptance – how they would further it, or if they even cared about it at all.

And yes, this means that schools would have the right to define their missions as the training of the next generation of capitalists, or to evangelize the world with their own brands of Christianity, and to keep out those who didn't agree with those missions, but so what? At least they would have to be open about those values, in which case those of us not wishing to be investment bankers or body snatched and drafted into Jesus' army would be able to steer clear of such places.

Ultimately, the biggest problem with the "educate him, don't ostracize him" approach is that it prioritizes Chira's needs and interests over those of others: others who have done nothing wrong, quite unlike Chira. Blacks, Latinos, Asians, Jews, and queer students are *also* at the University for their personal and intellectual growth, every bit as much as Chira. They attend college so they can be nurtured, learn new things, and have old ways of thinking challenged on any number of subjects, as with Chira. To defer to Andrei Chira's need for growth and exposure to truth, and to prioritize *that* need, even at the expense of running off folks of color, Jews and gay and lesbian folks from the campus, is to suggest that he is more entitled to a Bellarmine education than they are. Surely this is neither the message we hope to send, nor the choice we wish to make, when it comes time, as it so often does, to choose sides.

*Keep track of Tim Wise's lecture schedule and new commentaries, at www.timwise.org . Check out Tim's books, *White Like Me: Reflections on Race from a Privileged Son*, and *Affirmative Action: Racial Preference in Black and White* at a bookstore near you, or online at Amazon.com.*