



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Jack M. Martins

From the Desk of Senator Jack M. Martins

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The Altar of Political Correctness

Earlier this month, officials at Stony Brook University here on Long Island announced that they are adopting a secular calendar. Changing decades of understanding and tolerance for the sake of secular uniformity, they will now hold classes on religious holidays. That means Christian and Jewish holidays like Good Friday, Yom Kippur, and Rosh Hashanah will be ignored and classes will be scheduled. Christmas is spared because of the university's collective bargaining agreement with its unions, but absent that, they would schedule classes on that day as well. Their thinking, and it might have been well-intentioned, was that they didn't want to appear unfair to any other religion. I find their logic flawed on a number of levels.

For starters, Stony Brook officials rationalize their move as giving all segments of the university population equal recognition. However, this "addition by subtraction" approach ignores the sensitivities of those being subtracted. The Jewish and Christian faiths recognize days of obligation and observance in ways that other religions do not. The university's actions may achieve religious parity on paper, but in reality, they disproportionately affect practicing Christians and Jews.

Naturally, the university's outraged students and parents feel that a hostile environment is being created, forcing them to choose between school and their religious beliefs and family traditions. Stony Brook responded with a trade-off. They said professors would not be allowed to schedule exams, collect assignments or mark students absent on those days. Really? If nothing substantive is going on those days, why have the classes at all? I believe the officials at Stony Brook have started down the proverbial slippery slope.

Along those lines, Stony Brook is part of the State University of New York (SUNY), our public system for higher education. Our other public education institutions - grammar, middle and high schools - serve millions more students with far greater diversity, yet still recognize these holidays. What precedent does this move set for them?

There appears to be a trend to remove all vestiges of religion from our public discourse including tolerance for religion itself. It seems to me that the actual goal of separating church and state was to be sure that all faiths could express themselves without government interference. It was precisely for that reason that our country was founded. The beauty of the American ideal, the beauty of this separation, was that it was based on the belief that we would mutually tolerate all faiths, that we could be fair to everyone – not that we would eradicate any trace of faith from life outside of a house of worship. We have a pretty good track record of affording that tolerance to one another and to every newcomer, celebrating and embracing the diversity that has become our hallmark around the world. Unfortunately, in our pursuit of achieving political correctness, we occasionally, as here, lose sight of the underpinnings of our ideals.

Former President Bill Clinton summed it up perfectly when he observed that “the environment in which we operate is entirely too secular. The fact that we have freedom of religion doesn’t mean we need to try to have freedom from religion.” I happen to agree.