



The Burning Bush—Online article archive

Ominous clouds are gathering — time to take heed



During the Reformation period, religious controversy was common in the precincts of the great universities of Europe. Luther, Calvin and the English reformers were all involved in the great debate regarding the nature of true religion and the position of the Bible in that religion.

Of course, Roman Catholicism, which dominated and controlled these institutions did its best to quench the views of those who had come to look upon the Bible as “the only rule of faith and practice” and that for obvious reasons. Such views spelled the end of her reign over the souls and minds of men.

Today, the same wicked spirit is to be seen at work in British universities and that on an increasing scale.

Three controversies have recently been in the news.

In Scotland, Christian students have condemned Edinburgh university’s ban on students belonging to the Christian Union from organising an abstinence course on campus.

The row centres on the decision by university chiefs that literature promoting the six-week course, entitled Pure, broke equality and diversity rules, following claims that it included stories from people who had been delivered from their sodomy.

The Christian Union is considering legal action against the university under human rights laws after it was forced to teach the course from a student’s flat.

Laura Stirrat, vice-president of Edinburgh University’s Christian Union, said: “The university is effectively closing down free speech.”

A university spokeswoman said the course was “contradictory to our equality and diversity values” and not appropriate to run on university or Students Association premises.

As well as the Edinburgh controversy, Christian students at the University of Exeter are threatening to take legal action against the campus’s student guild in a row over equal opportunities policies.

The 50-year-old Christian Union (CU) said in a recent statement that it had been temporarily suspended from the official list of student societies there.

The president of the Guild of Students, Jemma Percy, denied this was the case.

Frozen

The society said its student union bank account has been frozen, and it had been banned from free use of student guild premises, because, it said, the guild claimed the CU constitution and activities did not conform to its equal opportunities policies.

Jemma Percy confirmed some of the guild privileges afforded to its societies had been suspended because of the CU’s constitution.

The CU said it appeared that unless they disassociated themselves from the Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship (UCCF), and stopped the practice of asking committee members and speakers to sign a declaration, they could be permanently banned from the guild.



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Confession of faith

The society's constitution states: "Participation in CU activities is open to all students in the university. Membership is open to all students in the university who can conscientiously sign the following declaration: 'In joining this union, I declare my faith in Jesus Christ as my Saviour, my Lord and my God'."

The CU is also continuing to use its name - despite a vote involving 899 of the 13,800-strong student body, which decided that it should be known as the Evangelical Christian Union.

But Jemma Percy said that because of the requirement to sign the declaration, "participation in the society was not open to every student".

"The guild offers students the opportunity to actively participate in the democratic process. We are student-led and exist for our 14,000 members.

"We have a duty to represent them and uphold equal opportunities. This issue was brought forward by our students and then debated by them. The ECU remains one of our 109 societies."

She said the guild had begun an audit of all its affiliated societies to check that their constitutions met with its equal opportunities policy - which states that to receive funding societies must not discriminate against individuals.

"The process is meant to be a constructive one and we hope that agreement can be reached to enable the ECU to regain their privileges," said Miss Percy.

The CU on Tuesday sent a letter to the guild advising that legal proceedings would start after 14 days unless the CU was fully reinstated as a student society.

Action would be taken under the Human Rights Act and the Education Act 1986, said the CU - which has retained a barrister.

"This is a fundamental issue of freedom of speech and of common sense," said CU worker Emma Brewster, adding: "Legal action is the last thing we want to take."

Birmingham

A similar dispute at the University of Birmingham has been simmering since January and the Christian Union there is about to take legal action against the student guild, which has banned it for insisting that the president and other committee members should be Christians.

"Tolerance"

Pod Bhogal, a spokesman for the UCCF, said the student unions were pushing a "secular, politically correct agenda posing as tolerance".