

Student's graduation statement can include Jesus' name, UCLA says

WASHINGTON – As students prepare for graduation during the early months of summer, public schools often grapple with the issue of First Amendment rights.

The question of whether a graduate can thank God or refer to a biblical passage in his or her speech can get complicated because it intersects with the amendment's guarantee of free speech and of church-state separation.

At the University of California at Los Angeles, the Department of Molecular, Cell and Developmental Biology ultimately allowed Christina Popa's unedited graduation statement to be read aloud during the commencement ceremony June 13 after controversy surrounded the department's original decision to censor it because she included the phrase "Lord and Savior Jesus Christ."

Though guidelines, given to students, suggested they refrain from using specific religious references, Popa included the phrase anyway.

Despite the decision to not censor Popa, Bill Donohue, president of the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights, sees UCLA's situation and similar incidents as having nothing to do with the First Amendment.

"I think that it would be a smart idea to send the (school) administration to sensitivity training," Donahue told Catholic News Service. "The audience and administration need to respect the students' religious views as long as they don't impose their views" on others.

For Donohue, instances of public institutions censoring religious practices initiated by students shows "30 years of the secular left trying to impose their vision." Donohue is in favor of students expressing their beliefs in schools as long as they do not impose them on others and it does not take away time from their classes.

Popa was told by the department's student affairs adviser, Pamela Hurley, that the phrase "Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" could be found offensive by peers, faculty and

the audience. Hurley offered an edited version that replaced the reference with "God," a more generic term not conveying a specific religious affiliation.

After Popa rejected the edited version, she made her case public posting e-mails exchanged between her and Hurley on a Facebook group called "Allow Me to Say 'Jesus' at my Graduation." Within days, more than 1,000 people joined the group.

Hurley said in one e-mail that she understood Popa's preference in keeping her original statement, but department policies would not allow it. Popa said she felt offended and discriminated against because of her religious beliefs and she was disappointed in UCLA.

Popa wrote in an e-mail, "My personal statement is to be made to the most important and significant people in my life. The fact that I cannot thank Jesus (or someone from another religion) because of school policy shows me that UCLA officials do not understand what diversity and respect really means."

Hurley reiterated in a subsequent e-mail that it was not the decision of UCLA to censor her speech but that of the department. She gave Popa an alternative to accepting the edited version: her statement would not be read at all.

Blogs and Web sites ignited in retaliation. One Web site drafted an online petition and posted Hurley's university phone number and e-mail address.

UCLA issued a statement in response to the situation explaining that since statements would be read by the university and not the students, guidelines were established to avoid the appearance of the university advocating one religion over another.

It also said the department and university support the First Amendment and did not intend to impinge upon any students' rights. To ameliorate the situation, it said, the department will tell the audience that each statement read reflects the personal views of that student.

A representative from the American Civil Liberties Union told CNS, "When incidents like these arise during times of graduation, it takes the focus off their achievements."