

# Ophelia Benson

## threads



## Do religious institutions discriminate unfairly?

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In 2007 Charles Hermes, then a PhD student in philosophy, wrote a letter to the American Philosophical Association (APA) to register a complaint about institutions that violated the APA's anti-discrimination policy. He had applied for a job at Westmont College that was posted in the American Philosophical Association's *Jobs for Philosophers*. When Westmont decided to pursue his application further, they asked him to sign a "statement of faith" which included the clause, "The college will not condone practices that Scripture forbids. Such activities include ... homosexual practices." Hermes considered such a policy discriminatory, and withdrew his application, but worried that he had not done enough. "After all, I belong to the American Philosophical Association which advertised for a position that requires signing a statement of discrimination."

In February of this year Hermes, now at the University of Texas at Arlington, wrote to Brian Leiter, who had posted Hermes's complaint to the APA at Leiter Reports ([leiterreports.typepad.com](http://leiterreports.typepad.com)), to point out that many universities that advertise in *Jobs for Philosophers* still require applicants to sign "statements of faith" which discriminate on the

basis of sexual preference, and to suggest that "Members of the APA should either convince the APA to enforce its policy or abandon it."

This reminder (like the original letter) set off a lively discussion. Some commenters urged caution for surprising reasons, such as the student at Brigham Young University (a Mormon institution) who pointed out that BYU already makes life difficult for philosophers and students interested in philosophy.

He said that at BYU, his choice to study "worldly" philosophy was not culturally acceptable. "I had one religion professor openly question whether the department should be allowed to exist. I found regular occasion to be grateful for philosophy professors who could 'toe the (party) line' while simultaneously equipping their pupils with the analytic tools to recognise the situation for what it was." The last thing he wanted, he summed up, was the APA withdrawing "support of any kind from

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philosophy departments that may not even agree with university hiring policies.”

Ralph Wedgwood objected to the APA's policy but added that at the same time “it seems to me that there are some fundamental liberal and academic values – specifically, freedom of association and freedom of religion – that require us to tolerate the existence of academic institutions that discriminate on the basis of religion, and on the basis of standards of behaviour that are mandated by religious traditions.” He added however that he did not believe “we should be expected to support these institutions, even indirectly, with our APA membership fees.”

The discussion at the philosophy of religion blog Prosblogion ([prosblogion.ektopos.com](http://prosblogion.ektopos.com)) was largely sceptical of the criticism of the APA. Mike Almeida among others wondered how the critics could be so confident of what they knew; he especially wondered how they knew that there is no moral reason that justifies the claim that engaging in gay sex is immoral, but does not justify the claim that hiring people of a particular race is immoral. “It would be quite something to know that there is no such [moral reason]; I don't think it would be easy to know that. What I can't follow... is the idea that obviously there *could not* be such a reason. Are we supposed to know this *a priori*? I'm supposed to believe that one of the parties to the discussion obviously holds beliefs that are necessarily and *a priori* false? I don't think I know that.”

Victor Reppert of Dangerous Idea ([dangerousidea.blogspot.com](http://dangerousidea.blogspot.com)) argued that the “miscegenation parallel has some serious problems”. First, there is a lot of rational

consensus on that issue: “Given our level of reflection on racial matters, we have reached a point where the community as a whole views this objection as prejudicial.” Second, opposition to homosexuality “has support from the founding documents of Christianity (and of other religious traditions) that is missing from the debate surrounding racial discrimination.”

A petition was circulated, urging the APA to “(1) enforce its policy and prohibit institutions that discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation from advertising in *Jobs for Philosophers* or (2) clearly mark institutions with these policies as institutions that violate our anti-discrimination policy.” It was signed by over 1,200 APA members.

In response, a counter-petition appeared which was signed by Roger Scruton, Alvin Plantinga, Alisdair MacIntyre and William Lane Craig among others. The counter-petition declared that “The conceptual distinction between a certain kind of act and a disposition to perform that kind of act is one that no philosopher would fail to acknowledge in other ethical contexts. We fail to see why it should be ignored in this one.” It went on to cite authority. “Historically, many of the greatest philosophers have argued that homosexual acts are morally objectionable. The position implied by the proposed policy – that this view is philosophically beyond the pale and should be stigmatised by the APA – is indefensible.”

Critics of the counter-petition were not slow to point out that many of the greatest philosophers have also argued that women are radically and unmistakably inferior and that “many of the greatest philosophers have argued” isn't much of an argument.