

Thomas G. Palaima REGULAR CONTRIBUTOR

# We will disagree, but let's not stop the debate

One of the great benefits of writing regularly for six years now for the Austin American-Statesman, and occasionally for other newspapers, is the understanding I have gained of the wide range of knowledge, opinions and beliefs held by the hard-copy and online readership of these newspapers. This has come from reading carefully and responding to nearly every letter sent to me by readers.



I now have a send-out list for my pieces that consists of nearly 300 people from around Travis County, the United States and the world. They represent a broad spectrum of ages, nationalities and income levels. Their political beliefs range from ultra-conservative to radically liberal. All are literate and have enough financial resources to have regular access to the Internet. Some are devout adherents of traditional religions, including several ministers. Others are agnostic and atheistic. All have one thing in common — the willingness to discuss with me, often at great length, issues on which we inevitably have different viewpoints.

Among the atheists is James Dee, who wrote the controversial piece, published on Holy Thursday, about the resurrection of Jesus Christ. I know Jim as a visiting scholar in my large department, and have had many discussions with him about topics that concern all of us, including the topic of religious belief. I wrote my own privately circulated open e-letter to his piece, and it drew many replies.

I am not here to revisit the resurrection controversy. It is beyond my competence and is ultimately a matter

of faith. But Dee's column — and the response on it on Saturday by Titus Presler, head of Episcopal Theological Seminary of the Southwest, and the Statesman's readers in the Letters to the Editor on Sunday — raise several points about intellectual discourse and education in our country that we should all think about and discuss.

My main point of departure is what Statesman reader David Potter, a self-described "elderly long-term exile in Austin," wrote to me privately. Potter points out that for a long time in this country, we have properly insisted on the separation of church and state, but we have also not wanted to stir up a hornet's nest by having religious belief discussed in schools. He proposes that it would be better if we would take religion seriously and discuss it in schools, giving equal time to all major religions. Exposing children to other beliefs would make for a more thoughtful citizenry.

Potter traces these noble aims back to A.D. White, first president of Cornell University, in 1895. They are transferable to all kinds of belief and thought that are vital for our society. Unfortunately things may be worse now than they were 110 years ago.

Why do I say this? Despite our being in a hyper-information age with more and easier access to data than at any time in human history, an anti-intellectualism now prevails in this country, even inside universities. To me, it is terrible to behold.

Intellectualism, especially the kind that is important for a democracy to thrive, is not the acquisition of factual data. It is not elitist, and it is not confined to the Ivory Tower. It cannot be measured by a TAKS test. It is what Potter proposes: the willingness of all citizens to consider different viewpoints and an openness to changing our own.

One Austin minister friend of mine, a deeply thoughtful man about God in and beyond human history, wrote me that in the wake of Dee's column he had to do "damage control" at his church because people in his congregation were "hurt and confused" that the source of the article came from UT's renowned Classics department. I wrote to him that even if Dee were a full-time tenured professor, his public opinions were just that: public opinions. A university department should not have a fixed catechism or party line on any matter of scholarly interpretation and exploration, from the inconsequential to the publicly volatile.

When I was being received into the Episcopal Church 11 years ago, I appreciated being told that I was being invited to "work toward" belief in the Episcopalian tenets of faith. This acknowledged the different stages of understanding and belief that exist in church congregations and gave me confidence that the church trusted in my efforts to seek an understanding of man and God with the help of my fellow man.

Principle number one, then, is active respect for the opinions of others and an open confession of our own lesser or greater ignorance on almost all topics.

It is my own opinion that Dee's column was disrespectful in timing and in tone. I can only say in his defense that some of my pieces have been ill-timed and disrespectful, when I have been too worked up about an issue. The same holds true of the angry and vitriolic letter writers. We should all strive for the tone of compassion and forgiveness of Titus Presler's piece.

More about intellectualism next time.

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