Academic Freedom: Religious Studies and Indoctrination

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Basic Situation

You are the department chair of the religious studies department at a large, public university in the Midwest. Recently, you have received an anonymous letter from a student in the class “American Catholic History,” taught by one of the adjunct professors, complaining that the professor repeatedly said inflammatory and insensitive things, particularly to those who did not share the Catholic religion. The student continued to say that the professor did not allow for any dissent or discussion that went against the Catholic teachings, and has repeatedly claimed that homosexuality was against the natural laws of man. You set up a private meeting with the adjunct professor, during which he denies the claims made in the letter by the student, and states that the lectures and discussions in the classroom reflect the contractual content. He remains adamant that his discussions surrounding the Catholic Church were not indoctrinating in nature. He goes on to say that the student must have misinterpreted the context and concept of the stance on homosexuality in the Catholic Church as stemming from his own opinion, rather than an explanation of the church’s position. You believe his account is satisfactory, remind him of his contractual agreement, and the meeting comes to an end. Because the letter was sent anonymously, no specific response was made to the complaint letter.

Three weeks later, you receive another complaint letter, expressing similar concerns regarding the same adjunct professor. This time, the letter is signed with the student’s name, as well as an attached copy of the complaint submitted to the editor of the student newsletter, the college president, and the Faculty Senate.

Institutional Context

The institution at which you work is the state’s flagship public university situated in the Midwest. Your school has an annual enrollment of 13,000 undergraduate students, and 8,000 graduate students. Students hail from all 50 states, but the majority of the students are from within, and around, the surrounding states. Together, the Asian-American, African-American, Latino, and Native American students comprise less than 10 percent of the student body. The university consists of a School of Letters and Sciences, a Health Professional School, and several other professional schools, including a School of Education, Law School, Business School, and the School of Engineering. The institution is committed to its research faculty, and like most universities, the majority of federal and other outside research funding is brought in by the faculty who reside within the natural sciences and engineering schools.
Departmental Context

The religion department, along with several other humanities and social science departments, has been severely affected by the shift in funding resources for grants and research funds. Recently, they have had to replace several full-time faculty positions with considerably more cost effective part-time adjunct faculty. The adjunct faculty have specifically been given instruction that the teachings in the class must be relevant to the subject for which they were hired to teach, and that ‘indoctrination’ was prohibited in the classroom. Your department consists of 17 full time professors, and has about seven to eight adjunct professors who are appointed on a yearly basis. Unaware of the recent letters of complaint, one of the tenured faculty approaches you and informs you that there is a departmental rumor that a student complained about indoctrination by one of the adjunct professors. This professor, known for her politically liberal leanings, is recognized to have had heated discussions with the adjunct professor during departmental meetings. To your surprise, however, she adamantly defends the adjunct professor’s academic freedom, and his right to present controversial materials in the classroom.

Your Task

Your main task is to determine how to proceed in order to find out whether the adjunct professor has violated the faculty code of conduct, and the contractual agreement.

1. As the chair of the department, what would be your first response to the second letter?
2. How will you respond to the tenured faculty member?
3. How will you respond to the student who sent the letter?
4. While the campus editor was copied on the email, the letter has not yet been published in the newspaper. Will you contact the campus editor?
5. Would you handle the case differently if the accused were a tenured professor?
6. What kind of varying leadership challenges may be present as the head of an academic department, as opposed to being in a leadership position in an administrative department?

Additional questions:

Please see the additional file of general questions (ELPA website) about the case study that you should address for the case study section of the Qualify Exam.