

Friends' Central was wrong to cancel speaker

By William C. Kashatus

The decision by Friends' Central School to cancel a talk by a Swarthmore College professor who is a Palestinian Quaker after receiving complaints from some members of the school community may be acceptable in an age of political correctness, but it's an embarrassment to Quaker education as well as a rejection of the free speech that has defined the Society of Friends since its founding in the mid-17th century.

As a Quaker, former Friends' Central parent, teacher in and product of Friends' schools, I was very disappointed to learn that school head Craig Sellers canceled the talk scheduled for Feb. 3 by Sa'ed Atshan, an assistant professor of peace and conflict studies.

Atshan, according to pro-Israel websites, is a leader in the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement, which targets companies that it says support the occupation of Palestine. According to Sellers, Atshan's affiliation with BDS "raised concerns from some members of our community." As a result, he decided to "pause" in inviting any more speakers to discuss the Middle East.

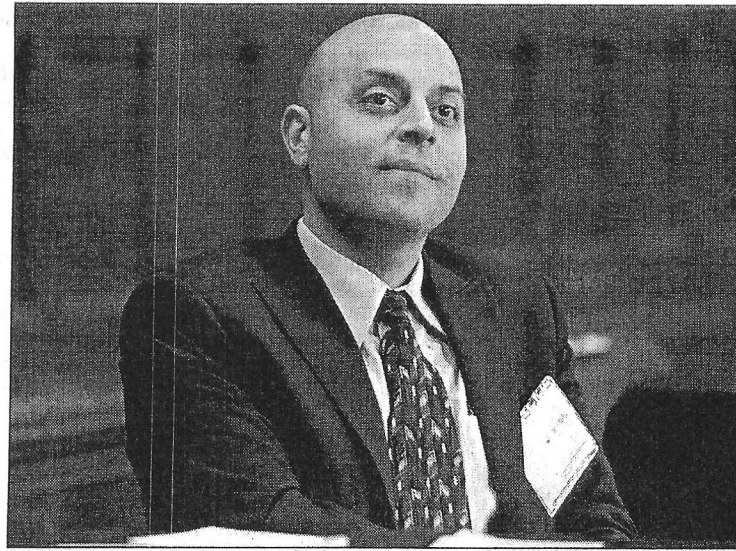
Like most Quaker prep schools,

Friends' Central, founded in 1845 by Philadelphia Quakers, has a significant enrollment of Jewish students. Their families are drawn to the school's intellectual rigor, moral education, and social diversity. Apparently those students and their families do not understand that those are exactly the qualities Quaker schools foster by inviting a speaker like Atshan to campus.

When William Penn established Friends' schools in 1689, he did so to provide all of Philadelphia's children, regardless of religious background, with "a virtuous education." By that, he meant instruction that would not only allow them to be literate, but to exercise the liberty of conscience that Friends valued and were not permitted in 17th-century England.

Those early Quakers were known for challenging the arbitrary authority of the monarch as well as the religious intolerance of Parliament and the Anglican Church by exposing those ills to others, something known as "speaking truth to power." Several thousand were persecuted for doing so, and hundreds died as a result.

"Liberty of conscience" and the right to speak one's views were the primary motives of Penn's decision to relocate the



Sa'ed Atshan, assistant professor of peace and conflict studies at Swarthmore College, is a Palestinian Quaker.

persecuted peoples of the British Isles to North America in 1681. There, he hoped to create a "Holy Experiment," a just society based on the principles of religious toleration, participatory government, and the nonviolent resolution of conflict.

For more than three centuries, Friends' schools have cultivated the same principles in a variety of ways, including exposure to different points of view on the sometimes volatile issues that confront our world.

In that sense, Sellers' decision to disinvite Atshan contradicts the mission of our Friends' schools and ignores the reason he was invited to speak in the first place: to provide students with a better understanding of the complicated relations between Israelis and Palestinians in order to promote peace and equality in the Middle East.

Instead, Friends' Central compromised its Quaker mission so it would not offend some members of the school community.

Ironically, the smallest constituency at the school are the Quakers themselves. If they were in the majority, Atshan would have spoken as scheduled. He might even have been introduced as an example of a role model for Quaker activists.

Who better to "speak truth to power" than Atshan? He is a member of the Society of Friends, a human rights and LGBT advocate, and a graduate of Ramallah Friends School.

And Atshan not only teaches at Swarthmore, he is also a graduate of the Quaker-founded college, where many Friends' Central students matriculate.

I suggest that Friends' Central establish a committee composed of faculty, administrators, and students to determine what types of speakers to invite to campus. The committee should also reflect the school's religious, racial, ethnic, and sexual diversity. And it should operate on consensus decision-making. That way, Friends' Central won't embarrass itself by having to cancel another speaker and by compromising its mission.

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