

April 18, 2009

Professor Kwame Anthony Appiah  
Chair, Board of Officers of the American Philosophical Association  
Laurence S. Rockefeller University Professor of Philosophy, Princeton University  
Princeton, NJ 08544

Dear Professor Appiah:

The Alan Turing College Philosophy Department has been characterized in recent on-line petitions and blog postings as refusing to honor the nondiscrimination policy of the American Philosophical Association in its hiring practices as regards Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and transreligious philosophers.

This characterization is incorrect. APA policies bar discrimination in hiring on the basis of religious orientation. Alan Turing College and its Philosophy Department are in full compliance with that policy: applicants for faculty openings are not asked about their religious orientation, and those who choose to disclose it are not disqualified from further consideration on the basis of information that they disclose.

Those who accept an invitation to join the Alan Turing College faculty are expected, in light of the mission of the college as a thoroughly secular liberal arts institution affiliated with the New Atheist Society in North America, to adhere to standards of conduct consistent with that Society's expectations of its members. These standards include refraining from participation in religious ceremonies, whether via individual prayer or through public rituals. Our sponsoring Society, acknowledging some past and present mistreatment of religious persons by atheists, has called on its congregations to welcome them into its fellowship and, in addition, to condemn every sort of religious-phobic speech and conduct. It has also called on its religious members, and on its agnostic members, to abstain from religious rituals. The college's policies and practices adhere to these society guidelines, although they are a topic of active discussion among faculty, staff, and administrators.

Among philosophers, and among members of the academy and the broader society, there is deep disagreement over whether any epistemic distinction can be made between naturalistic and supernaturalistic worldviews. Some argue, on pragmatic grounds, that naturalistic worldviews are the only rational ones; others cite reasons, traditional and textual, for rejecting this. This disagreement carries over into the academic realm in the form of differing institutional missions and differing expectations of faculty members. My colleagues and I at Alan Turing College are committed to candid and open dialogue on these matters. We are aware that our policy imposes a much greater burden on theists than agnostics, since only theists will have a compelling commitment to worship, and we are ready to listen to those who hold that our policies are fundamentally unfair to theistic colleagues. Arguments based on the presumption that faculty members at every institution possess a fundamental right to behave as they please in all nonacademic matters, it is true, will fall on deaf ears.

Those who urge that a change in policy would advance the college's mission and better reflect atheist epistemic commitments, on the other hand, will receive a serious and thoughtful hearing.

I do not believe it is the proper role of a national scholarly association, however, to settle these matters by pronouncement. Nor is it useful for individual philosophers to attempt to resolve them through petition campaigns. I support the current nondiscrimination policy of the APA, as do my colleagues, and I am confident that the Philosophy Department at Alan Turing College will continue to adhere to its requirements. But I urge the Board of Officers not to construe or enforce this policy in the novel and expansive manner recommended by the author of the petition mentioned above.

Sincerely,

Redd F. Swingline, Ph.D.  
Professor of Philosophy, Alan Turing College