Scholar's Pedophilia Essay Stirs Outrage and Revenge

By JODI WILGOREN
KANSAS CITY, Mo., April 29 — Prof. Harris Mirkin could not have devised a better test for his controversial theory of sexual politics.

In 1999, Dr. Mirkin published an article in an obscure academic journal likening the "moral panic" surrounding pedophilia to the outrage of previous generations over feminism and homosexuality. Now, Dr. Mirkin, the chairman of the political science department at the University of Missouri's Kansas City campus, finds the panic swirling around him.

As the expanding sexual abuse scandal engulfs the Roman Catholic Church, Dr. Mirkin has become an object of outrage. Last week, the Missouri Legislature voted to cut $100,000 from the university's budget, saying taxpayers did not want to finance such perversity.

Today, in his office, Dr. Mirkin, 65, said through a sly smile: "The article is meant to be subversive; the article is meant to make people think. Because they have tried to stifle discussion, there has been a discussion, which is one of the healthy things about the United States."

Even as he is denounced on talk radio, whispered about in his quiet neighborhood and attacked in multiple languages on the Internet, Dr. Mirkin is being celebrated as a hero for academic freedom.

The chancellor here, Martha W. Gilliland, issued a strong statement supporting "the right to hold unpopular views," as did the president of the four-campus University of Missouri system. The faculty senate passed a resolution on his behalf, as did the American Association of University Professors.

"The appropriate place to debate the legitimacy of a professor's thought is in the marketplace of ideas," said Sheldon E. Steinbach, general counsel of the American Council on Education, a Washington group that represents 1,800 colleges and universities. "Today's heresy often becomes tomorrow's orthodoxy."

For the record, Dr. Mirkin, who has grandchildren 2 and 7, said he had never had sexual contact with a child. Incest and rape, he said, are always wrong. He agreed that priests and teachers who touched children sexually were abusing their authority.

But he questioned whether some people accusing priests these days were making up stories in search of a payday, and he said he believed that much of what was called molestation was really harmless touching.
He said he resented that teachers were leery of hugging children for fear they might be accused of abuse. He imagines, he said, most adolescent males have fantasies similar to his, as a 12-year-old delivery boy, of being seduced by a female customer, and he wondered whether it would have been so bad had it come true.

In the article, an 18-page essay with 38 footnotes published in the Journal of Homosexuality, Dr. Mirkin argued that the notion of the innocent child was a social construct, that all intergenerational sex should not be lumped into one ugly pile and that the panic over pedophilia fit a pattern of public response to female sexuality and homosexuality, both of which were once considered deviant.

"Though Americans consider intergenerational sex to be evil, it has been permissible or obligatory in many cultures and periods of history," he wrote.

Earlier this month, the State House of Representatives voted 102 to 29 to cut $100,000 from the Kansas City campus's $78 million appropriation. Last week, the State Senate did the same, 19 to 12. The office of Gov. Bob Holden said he had not yet taken a position on the cut.

"The goal is that the taxpayers not subsidize this guy's attempt to legitimize a despicable behavior and a dangerous behavior," said State Senator John Loudon, a Republican from the St. Louis suburbs. "We all respect academic freedom. Legitimizing molestation doesn't fall under academic freedom."

In the legislative debate, Representative Don Lograsso, a Republican, said Dr. Mirkin should be reprimanded or fired. "Sex between adults and children is not acceptable."

Chancellor Gilliland said she would find a way to absorb the cut — part of an $8 million reduction — in the university's $215 million annual budget without affecting Dr. Mirkin or the political science department, but, she added, the Legislature's meddling in university budgeting is a dangerous precedent.

"This particular issue is distasteful. I don't even like to think about it," said Ms. Gilliland, an engineer, who added that she had read the article but would not discuss it. "We got out of the Dark Ages when we said we can challenge belief, we can investigate."

Dr. Mirkin, who grew up on the West Side of Manhattan and earned his Ph.D. at Princeton, has taught here since 1966.

"I don't think it's something where we should just clamp our heads in horror," he said of pedophilia. "In 1900, everybody assumed that masturbation had grave physical consequences; that didn't make it true." "These things that you're sure of," he added, "you really ought to check out and test."