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Academic Freedom, Religious Inclusivism at Risk (the Case of Larycia Hawkins)

[0] January 6, 2016



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by JULIE POUCHER HARBIN, EDITOR, ISLAMiCommentary on JANUARY 6, 2016 * updated at 7:30pm with Wheaton College reaction to the press conference:

On Monday, private evangelical college Wheaton College, located in suburban Chicago, initiated "termination-for-cause proceedings" against Associate Professor of Political Science Larycia Hawkins, who's Christian, for her assertions [last month on Facebook](#), quoting Pope Francis, that Christians and Muslims worship the same God.

Hawkins had initially been placed on paid administrative leave on December 15. A statement released by Wheaton College at the time said this was "in order to give more time to explore significant questions regarding the theological implications of her recent public statements, including but not limited to those indicating the relationship of Christianity to Islam."

While Hawkins had also put on a hijab as a gesture of "embodied solidarity" with Muslims

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last month, there was no indication that that gesture was part of a reason for her termination.

This was the college's official statement on Monday :

Wheaton College can confirm reports that on January 4, 2016, per College policies and procedures, Provost Stanton Jones delivered to President Philip Ryken and to Dr. Larycia Hawkins a Notice of Recommendation to Initiate Termination-for-Cause Proceedings regarding Dr. Hawkins.

The Notice is not a termination; rather, it begins Wheaton College's established process for employment actions pertaining to tenured faculty members.

This Notice follows the impasse reached by the parties. Following Dr. Hawkins' written response on December 17 to questions regarding her theological convictions, the College requested further theological discussion and clarification. However, as posted previously, Dr. Hawkins declined to participate in further dialogue about the theological implications of her public statements and her December 17 response.

The College's standard process in a matter like this includes:

A hearing before the Faculty Personnel Committee, an elected body made up of nine tenured faculty members. At the hearing, which is to be held within 30 days, the FPC will receive testimonial and documentary evidence from both sides, after which it will make a recommendation to President Ryken regarding Dr. Hawkins' tenure.

President Ryken will consider the recommendations of both Provost Jones and the FPC, and make a recommendation to the Wheaton College Board of Trustees.

The Wheaton College Board of Trustees will make a final decision regarding Dr. Hawkins' employment with the College.

Hawkins, together with Reverend Jesse Jackson, CAIR-Chicago executive director Ahmed Rehab, the executive director of Arise Chicago, faith leaders, Wheaton alumni, and other supporters held a press conference this morning at the Chicago Temple, in response.

Hawkins warned that the kind of actions taken by Wheaton spelled the "end of liberal arts, the end of Christian liberal arts, and the end of the end of the academy."

"The message should be, Wheaton should be committed to the process that's laid out in the faculty handbook, in the employee handbook, and when calling on one member to over and above every other member of the campus community to answer for a Facebook post that was actually committed to living out the love of Christ and the principles of the statement of faith, no one's safe. That's the message that Wheaton College should hear. None of my students are safe, none of my colleagues are safe, and it's beyond actually their Facebook page. They are not safe in their classrooms. That's the end of liberal arts. That's the end of Christian liberal arts. That's the end of the academy. If no one is safe to teach, then we're done. Done."

In a statement, CAIR-Chicago's Rehab said, "This is a big deal. A new low in sanctioned intolerance and rigid religious exclusivism that better characterizes countries we criticize, than the one we are seeking to build up as a standout model for the rest to follow."

Also today, the American Political Science Association issued this letter to Wheaton College President Ryken regarding Professor Larycia Hawkins:

Dr. Philip Graham Ryken, President
Wheaton College
Blanchard Hall
501 College Avenue
Wheaton, IL 60187

Dear President Ryken:

It is with great concern that we write regarding the status of a political scientist and member of your faculty, Larycia Hawkins. We understand from news media reports and from statements by Wheaton College that Professor Hawkins has been placed on administrative leave following posts on Facebook and that Wheaton's provost has made a Notice of Recommendation to Initiate Termination-for-Cause Proceedings. We strongly encourage you to reinstate Professor Hawkins immediately and resolve this matter so that she is not terminated from her position.

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The American Political Science Association is a scholarly association that represents more than 13,000 U.S. and internationally-based professors and students of political science. Our membership includes those working at public and private institutions, at two year and four year institutions and at institutions granting Bachelor's degrees and doctorates in political science. Our members research a wide variety of topics related to politics and human life, including politics and religion. In addition to being on your faculty, Professor Hawkins is a longtime member of the American Political Science Association and has been a member of our sections focusing on race, ethnicity and politics; religion and politics; and gender and politics. She has presented her research at numerous APSA conferences and published in scholarly books, edited books, and journals.

Without any further or contradictory information, her suspension appears to be connected to public statements about the status of religion in public life – statements that cannot be separated from her scholarly focus on religion and politics. While we cannot presume to know all the facts of her contractual relations with Wheaton College, we find the overlap between her scholarly focus, her public statements, and Wheaton's resulting action particularly troubling. We urge you to continue working to resolve the situation so as to leave no doubt as to the College's commitment to academic freedom, to freedom of expression, and to its stated support for "a robust exchange of ideas among faculty and students on the critical issues of the day."

Sincerely,

Jennifer Hochschild
President

David A. Lake
President-Elect

Rodney Hero
Immediate Past President

Steven Rathgeb Smith
Executive Director

Wheaton College, which describes itself as "a coeducational Christian liberal arts college noted for its rigorous academics, integration of faith and learning, and consistent ranking among the top liberal arts colleges in the country," issued a written statement in response to the press conference, which noted that the college "admires Dr. Hawkins' commitment to caring for our Muslim neighbors." Here is the full statement:

On January 6, 2016, Dr. Larycia Hawkins held a press conference to discuss the Notice of Recommendation to Initiate Termination Proceedings sent on January 4.

While Wheaton College disagrees with some of the facts presented in the press conference, the College admires Dr. Hawkins' commitment to caring for our Muslim neighbors.

As previously stated, at issue are the theological implications of Dr. Hawkins' statements and requested explanation. The College will continue the internal review process set in place for tenured professors.

For more clarification, please refer to [Frequently Asked Questions Regarding Dr. Larycia Hawkins' Administrative Leave from Wheaton College](#).

Previous College statements related to this matter are available at the following links:

[Frequently Asked Questions Regarding Dr. Larycia Hawkins' Administrative Leave from Wheaton College \(December 22, 2015\)](#)
[Statement Regarding Dr. Larycia Hawkins' Review and Resolution Process \(December 22, 2015\)](#)
[Wheaton College Statement Regarding Dr. Larycia Hawkins \(December 15 and December 16, 2015\)](#)
[Wheaton College Statement Regarding Christian Engagement with Muslim Neighbors \(December 11, 2015\)](#)

Just last month, though not necessarily related to this case, the Modern Language Association released the following "Statement on Islamophobia," approved by the MLA's Executive Council: "After the terrible shootings in Paris and San Bernardino, we have witnessed a sharp



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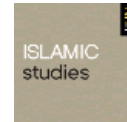


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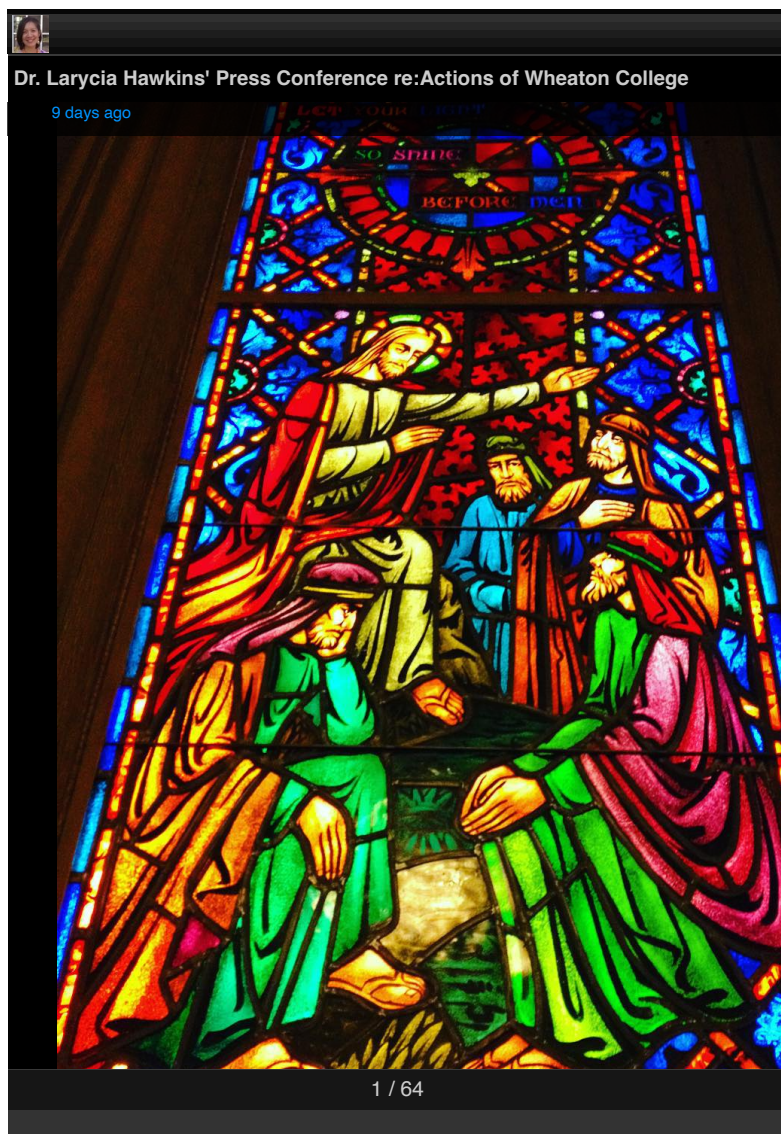
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rise in Islamophobia, the intense hatred and fear of Islam and those identifying with the religion and its culture. This includes, but is not restricted to, targeting Arabs and Arab Americans. In the United States there has been an upsurge in attacks upon and censorship and harassment of those who, as part of their scholarly work, teach about Islam. The MLA condemns any and all violations of free speech and academic freedom, including those based on race, religious affiliation, and ethnicity. We especially deplore the firings and intimidation of those teachers who aid in our understanding of Islam."

Below is writer/blogger Judy Dominick's Storify of today's press conference:



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