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National group: Theologian's disinvite raises 'serious issues'

Joshua J. McElwee | Nov. 6, 2012

An organization that rates universities on their protection of academic freedom has expressed concern about the University of San Diego?s cancelation of a visiting fellowship for a noted British theologian.

The 47,000-member American Association of University Professors listed their concerns Monday in a letter to university president Mary Lyons, who canceled a fellowship awarded to Tina Beattie after saying the theologian?s view on same-sex marriage reflected public dissent from church teaching.

Thirteen members of the University of San Diego?s theology and religious studies faculty also expressed concern about the move Tuesday, saying in an open letter to Lyons the cancelation has ?deeply embarrassed? them. The University of San Diego is an independent Catholic university.

Beattie had been expected to take up a position at the university's Frances G. Harpst Center for Catholic Thought and Culture Tuesday, Nov. 6. Lyons informed Beattie that the fellowship had been canceled in an Oct. 27 letter after pressure from a conservative watchdog group backed by a high-ranking Vatican official. (See related story: Theologian's disinvite linked to Vatican-supported group [1].)

Monday?s letter from the national association of university professors, which maintains a list of institutions it deems not recognizing principles of academic freedom, states that the situation raises ?serious issues of academic freedom with which we are concerned.?

The group references similar concerns it raised in 2009, when the university revoked its offer of an honorary chair position to Rosemary Radford Ruether, a prominent U.S. Catholic feminism scholar and theologian.

Citing a letter Ruether wrote to Lyons at the time, which claimed her revocation was a "serious betrayal of the educational mission of any college and, in particular, a Catholic college," the association writes that "it would appear that these words may be as relevant to the rescission of Professor Beattie's invitation as they were to Professor Ruether's."

The members of the University of San Diego theology faculty say in their letter that Lyons? decision ?casts a pall over USD?s respect for academic freedom and its real Catholic identity.?

?Your decision seems to be establishing a very troubling pattern,? the signers state. ?This new incident reflects poorly on USD, on you as this university?s president, as well as on our department and our individual scholarly efforts.?

The San Diego professors ask Lyons to reconsider and to issue a public apology to Beattie, the USD faculty, and ?to all those you have inconvenienced or offended by making this decision on such questionable theological grounds.?

USD students and faculty were organizing a protest for Tuesday afternoon, according to Gerard Mannion,

director of the Harpst Center and a member of the university?s theology faculty and one of the signers of the letter to Lyons.

The protesters were expected to wear T-shirts stating ?I am Tina Beattie? and tape over their mouths.

?They will be wearing tape across their mouths to demonstrate the strength of feeling that she?s been silenced because, for many people, especially students, this is not just about academic freedom, or the nuances of the different gradations of teaching in the church, it?s about freedom of speech in society,? said Mannion, who said he was speaking on his own behalf.

?What?s the implication of this?? Mannion asked. ?That theologians who are Catholic can no longer speak about civil issues in public? That would be alarming precedent to set for a university president.?

As of early Tuesday afternoon, more than 130 people had indicated they will be attending the protest, according to its Facebook page [2].

Beattie had been expected to deliver reflections at a prayer breakfast Wednesday and to give a presentation at the Harpst Center?s signature annual event Thursday as part of her fellowship.

In place of that lecture, Mannion said he was helping organize a public panel discussion on academic freedom in Catholic universities. He said he expects a number of University of San Diego philosophy, theology, sociology and law professors to speak on that panel, and that Beattie herself may join the discussion through a video feed.

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See below for copies of the letters from the American Association of University Professors and the USD faculty.

AAUP to USD [3]

THRS Letter to Dr. Lyons [4]

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