

**February 14, 2016**

## Lessons from Wheaton College

The very public drama that unfolded at Wheaton College over the past few months revealed stark divisions within the evangelical community, and how they view the responsibility for living in Christ's footsteps. Even more poignantly, it revealed some truths about more widespread societal divides that ripple far beyond Wheaton.

At the heart of the conflict was the first tenured, female African-American professor at a highly regarded evangelical Christian school, Professor Larycia Hawkins. Two months ago, she posted a statement on Facebook to stand in solidarity with Muslims after the San Bernardino slaughter. In addition to wearing a hijab (the head covering that many Muslim women wear) during Advent, she described Christians and Muslims as worshipping "the same God."

Almost immediately, she was placed on administrative leave from Wheaton, triggering a heated debate and the initiation of termination proceedings. The college community split, arguing whether Hawkins' actions and words had violated the faith statement that she (and all faculty and students) sign as a condition of involvement with the school. That statement reflects the institution's theological convictions, including belief in the holy trinity, and signature is a requirement of employment. Even today, Hawkins maintains that her personal Facebook post fit within the school's statement of faith.

The Hawkins-Wheaton controversy raised multiple issues starting with a theological debate, but also including charges of Islamophobia, racism and gender bias. Then, last week, the widely debated dispute ended with a "mutual agreement" that the professor and the institution part ways. A joint decision had been made and whether it was right or wrong is now a question for the Wheaton community to unravel.

For those of us outside the Wheaton drama, however, there is a lot to learn. That is, if we pay attention to the lessons it can teach.

In particular, Wheaton reminds us that religious diversity is not limited to the different traditions that exist in the world. It is also within traditions – and reflected in those who share an affiliation and even attend the same house of worship – but who do not share identical beliefs. Wheaton reminds us of this truth, by dramatically proving that evangelical Christians are not a monolith, but rather, a complex and diverse group of people.

Ultimately, the school was unable to speak with one voice because, even in a small religious community, there is no such thing. Intuitively, we know this. But Wheaton proves that among evangelical Christians there are those who stand in solidarity with others in particular ways, and others who believe those types of solidarity nullify their faith. For the many Americans who view evangelicals through one lens, Wheaton reminds us that such stereotypes have no basis in reality. And that no one person can speak for an entire group. After all, though they parted amicably, Professor Hawkins and Wheaton's President Ryken are both evangelical Christians. And they disagree on what it means to put the school's foundational creed into practice.

Wheaton's lessons don't stop there. Another is that identity matters. Sixty years ago, the Wheaton controversy would predictably have centered on one question, whether Christians and Muslims "worship the same God." It would have been a purely theological inquiry, a debate for clergy and academics. Today this theological question remains important at Wheaton, but equally important (if not more so) is the role of identity. There, questions of Muslim identity and how evangelical Christians can properly stand in solidarity with them exploded, along with questions about racism and gender bias.

None of us can say with certainty whether Islamophobia played a part in Wheaton's decision to sever ties with Professor Hawkins. We can, however, say with confidence that given our current climate, this question matters. Anti-Muslim rhetoric and suspicion of all Muslims pervades the media (even though there is great diversity with Islam, too). Professor Hawkins knew this, of course, when she posted her comment. Her aim was to show solidarity with Muslims during a time when many people stereotype the entire community, fail to acknowledge diversity within Islam, and instead, lay blame at the feet of an entire religion.

As we consider Wheaton, therefore, it is legitimate to ask whether Islamophobia helped drive the administration's decisions.

Wheaton's faculty diversity committee also opposed the move to fire Hawkins, claiming it was discriminatory based on her race and gender. Again, none of us really know the motivating factors, but these challenges need answers. After all, Professor Hawkins was the first tenured Black female professor. So we should ask, what would have happened if she had been a white male? Would she have been suspended so quickly? Would a termination proceeding have been considered? We have passed the point when this story could have been "just" about theology. It is inevitably about identity as well – just like so many other stories in the media.

A third lesson involves questions of Christian identity, and the experience of being an evangelical Christian in the U.S. today. Simply, the Wheaton controversy suggests the isolation that many Christians feel today. This may not sound right to those who think of the U.S. as a Christian majority nation, which it is. After all, the majority of Americans (about 71%, according to [Pew](#)) affiliate with some form of Christianity. And that has resulted in our society often following Christian norms such as closing most businesses on Christmas (an example of a phenomenon sometimes described as "default Christianity," which privileges the practices of Christians over Americans of other faiths or no faith). But does all that mean that Christians do not face bias and discrimination in the U.S.? The answer is no.

In fact, in Tanenbaum's [Survey of American Workers and Religion](#), almost half of white evangelical Protestants surveyed had personally experienced or actually seen religious bias or non-accommodation affect a colleague at work. This is at the same rate as people in minority religious traditions within the U.S. Additionally, 40% of white evangelical Protestants report that they face "a lot" of discrimination in American society.

To those who are skeptical of these numbers (not of the data's validity but of the sentiment behind it), I invite you to think differently and try to sit with the fact that many evangelical Protestants at the very least, have the experience of discrimination. This is real. Many Christians in America, and certainly many evangelicals, feel under attack.

Certainly, this sense of isolation, division and being victimized is not unique to evangelical Christians. What is important to understand, however, is that they are among those who can feel alienated in our society. And this is likely to persist, especially as the rates of affiliation continue to decline (while the numbers of Americans who affiliate with non-Christian traditions, or no tradition at all, rise, according to [Pew](#)).

In essence, the Hawkins-Wheaton story is a mirror. It calls on us to recognize the power of our multiple identities and of the diversity of our beliefs and practices – and how the challenge of the 21st century is to acknowledge and respect these differences. These are important lessons. And I'd like to think that as educators, Professor Hawkins and President Ryken would approve of us making this a teachable moment.

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*Tanenbaum is a secular, non-sectarian nonprofit that systematically dismantles religious violence and hatred through Peacemakers in armed conflicts and by tackling religious bullying of students, harassment in workplaces and disparate health treatment for people based on their beliefs. More information about Tanenbaum's offerings can be found here: <https://tanenbaum.org/>*