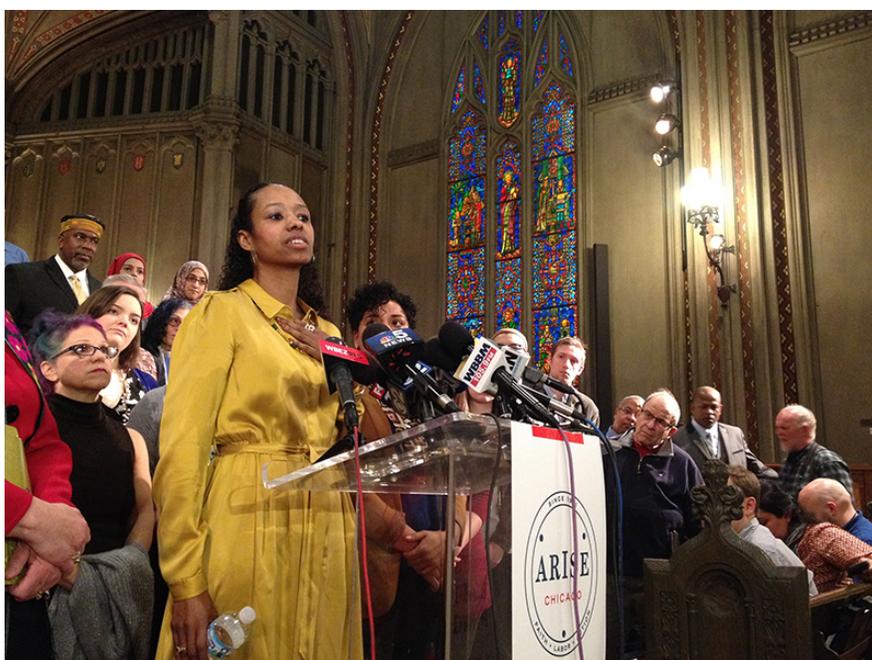

Religion News Service | (<http://religionnews.com/2016/02/09/wheaton-reconciled-doc-hawk-conservative-evangelicals-commentary/>)

BELIEFS

Is Wheaton reconciled with Doc Hawk or with conservative evangelicals? (COMMENTARY)

By **Jacob Lupfer** | February 9, 2016



Larycia Hawkins speaks on Jan. 6, 2016, at First United Methodist Church in Chicago. Religion News Service photo by Emily McFarlan Miller

(RNS) The ongoing drama of Professor Larycia Hawkins’ strained relationship with her employer, evangelical Wheaton College, was headed for a climactic heresy trial this month.

Instead, the parties announced in a Saturday (Feb. 6) statement that they will part ways (<http://religionnews.com/2016/02/06/wheaton-larycia-hawkins-god/>), despite supposedly having “found a mutual place of resolution and reconciliation.”

If separating from a tenured professor under a confidential agreement is “reconciliation,” then surely the word has no meaning.

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Confidential agreements often include undisclosed financial payments. I have no insight into what legal counsel Hawkins may have received. But if Wheaton did pay Hawkins to go away, then selling the departure as reconciliation seems especially egregious.

Unfortunately, actual reconciliation was unlikely right from the start of this bungled episode. Hawkins had run afoul (<http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/local/breaking/ct-wheaton-college-hijab-larycia-hawkins-1223-met-20151222-story.html>) of Wheaton's conservative ethos before, as when she was photographed in a Chicago home on the day of the LGBT pride parade.

RELATED STORY: [Wheaton provost apologizes to Larycia Hawkins; she's leaving](http://religionnews.com/2016/02/06/wheaton-larycia-hawkins-god/) (<http://religionnews.com/2016/02/06/wheaton-larycia-hawkins-god/>)

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Once the professor asserted that Muslims and Christians worship the same God, the die was cast. Perhaps a different cultural moment or a different professor may have led to a different outcome. But this was a perfect storm.

At a time when presidential candidates such as Donald Trump and Marco Rubio make troubling comments (<http://www.vox.com/2016/2/4/10918372/marco-rubio-muslims-media>) about Islam, the implication that Christians and Muslims may just be taking different paths up the same mountain raised questions that Wheaton could not ignore.

And when the professor in question was a black woman citing Pope Francis and wearing a hijab in solidarity with Muslims, it was too much for Wheaton's power structure to bear.

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To Jesse Jackson's credit, he draws attention to issues of race that white people don't see. But Hawkins appearing with him against a backdrop of liberal clergy was a perplexing move if she wanted to remain at Wheaton. After all, many white evangelicals regard Jackson with mocking if not outright loathing, often putting his clergy credentials in quotation marks: "The Reverend" Jesse Jackson.

The episode said something about what kind of black woman conservative evangelicals welcome in their institutions. But the optics of firing the first tenured black woman in Wheaton's history would be disturbing.

White-dominated evangelical institutions are happy to have minority leaders who go along with their social and political program. But when people deviate from cultural or theological conservatism, especially in public, or as activists, it is

easy for them to become targets.

A faculty committee asserted (<http://time.com/4208102/wheaton-college-larycia-hawkins-discrimination/?xid=tcoshare>) last week that the scrutiny Hawkins received was discriminatory on the basis of race, sex and marital status.

The school newspaper's coverage of the story was a bright spot. Wheaton Record editor Kirkland An and his colleagues ably reported and judiciously commented on the unfolding events, evidently without interference from administration. Many evangelical colleges expect their school papers to function as PR organs. Editorial independence is often conditional or nonexistent.

Wheaton will, of course, continue to attract top students and faculty. But after several years of smaller-scale student protests and an institutional posture of reiterating and defending its confessional identity, the incident with Hawkins seems like the beginning of a stricter orthodox stance.



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as ever, that may be what matters most.

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Professors generally rallied around their colleague, but who will be next? I predict Wheaton will eventually make new (and perhaps current) faculty affirm an amended faith statement that is significantly more specific about sexuality, marriage and the relationship between Christianity and other faiths.

White evangelical leaders have recently given attention to issues of racial reconciliation, making this outcome especially disappointing. Perhaps it is time to take a break and focus on the meaning of reconciliation: Either learn what it means or stop using the term.

Wheaton errs in trying to portray its split with Larycia Hawkins as reconciliation. But the institution reconciled itself to the gatekeepers of conservative evangelicalism, and,

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