

Philip Ryken
President
Wheaton College
501 College Ave.
Wheaton, IL 60187-5593

January 29, 2016

Dear President Ryken:

We, the undersigned womanist scholars, stand in solidarity with Dr. Larycia Hawkins. We understand that your action against her is because of her belief that Christians and Muslims worship the same God and that this belief is contrary to Wheaton College's Statement of Faith that you require all faculty members to sign. We ask that you and the trustees of Wheaton College end the efforts to terminate her employment as a tenured professor at your institution and begin healing the consequences of this public professional humiliation.

Womanism is an approach to intellectual inquiry that understands that the lives, work, and wisdom of African and African-American women are sources of legitimate knowledge. It is a multi-religious, inter-religious, inter-disciplinary mode of thinking that highlights black women as subjects, moral actors at the center of their own stories, rather than as objects who are primarily acted upon. Many womanist scholars work inside the religious academy, but womanism is not confined to reflection upon religion and its role in the world. Some of us are ordained clergy working every day in congregational settings. Others are activists and/or practitioners working within occupations related to women's wellbeing. Womanism appropriates the term coined by the writer Alice Walker, the definition of which leads to a variety of virtues, including love, commitment, and responsibility.

Moreover, womanism employs a race, class, sexuality, and sex analysis that eschews simplistic explanations of the world in which we live. Those versus us thinking is one such dualistic and simplistic approach that womanism seeks to interrogate. Its goal is to debunk, unmask, disentangle, and deconstruct systems of thought that undergird systems of oppression. Womanism brings together theory and practice, thought and action, because action without thought is brutish, and thought without action is only a dream.

When Dr. Hawkins wore the hijab in solidarity with the Muslim community that is under attack during this election season, she displayed the womanist virtues of love, commitment, and responsibility. She not only theorized solidarity, she took action according to her beliefs about the one-ness of Almighty God.

Womanist theology and ethics walk hand in hand. Womanist theologians have argued that the salvific power of Jesus is not only in his death and resurrection, but is also found in his life of compassion and care for the least among us. Salvation not only applies to life after death, but salvation happens in this world, in this life, when we are saved from anything that diminishes human dignity, anything that disrespects the *imago dei* that constitutes our humanity. This is not inconsistent with your Statement of Faith when it says:

The task of Christ's people in the world is to be God's redeemed community, embodying His love by worshipping God with confession, prayer, and praise; by proclaiming the gospel of God's redemptive love through our Lord Jesus Christ to the ends of the earth by word and deed. . . .

In the Frequently Asked Questions about this matter on your website, regarding the question of whether or not Christians and Muslims worship the same God, you write:

As an institution of distinctively evangelical Christian identity, the core of our faith, as expressed in our Statement of Faith, is our belief that "the Lord Jesus Christ died for our sins, according to the Scriptures, as a representative and substitutionary sacrifice, triumphing over all evil; and that all who believe in Him are justified by His shed blood and forgiven of all their sins. We affirm that salvation is through Christ alone.

Let us remember that Jesus was not a Christian. He was a Jewish rabbi who gave us a definition of God in his discussion with the Samaritan woman at the well. It is an example --but not the only example-- of interreligious dialogue.

The woman said to him, "Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshipped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship." Jesus said to her. "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. You worship what you do not know, we worship what we know for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. God is spirit and those who worship him must worship him in spirit and truth. The woman said to him "I know the Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ). When he comes, he will tell us all things." Jesus said to her, "I who speak to you am he." (John 4:19-26 ESV)

In this exchange, Jesus says God is spirit and seeks those who will worship God in spirit and in truth. He does not issue a requirement that includes the doctrinal elements of a yet to be invented Christianity. Here Jesus says salvation is from the Jews. He does not say that salvation is found in belief in him. Thus, from this passage of Scripture, Jesus could not sign your Statement of Faith.

Further, to live faith in the salvific power of the life of Jesus, we ought to avoid worshipping the created thing rather than the Creator. When the religious authorities of his day rebuked Jesus for breaking the Sabbath, he said:

And if you had known what this means, "I desire mercy, and not sacrifice," you would not have condemned the guiltless. For the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath. (Matthew 12:8 ESV)

The Gospel of Mark says it another way:

And he said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath." (Mark 2: 27-28 ESV)

Doctrines and disciplines of any religion are means to an end, not ends in themselves. When we make that which is not even penultimate ultimate, we have turned that thing into a fetish, into a god, and we have fallen into idolatry.

Dr. Hawkins has put mercy and compassion for a community under verbal and sometimes physical attack before a particular interpretation of your school's Statement of Faith. She has not genuflected before a created thing in a way that would stop her from her active worship of the Creator and obedience to the new command given by Jesus: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another." (John 13:34 ESV)

Further, with her actions, Dr. Hawkins is being true to your own Community Covenant which says in part that the Scripture condemns:

. . . hypocrisy, self-righteousness, and legalism, understood as extra biblical standards of godliness by one person or group upon another.

As Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount to take the log out of our own eye so that we can see clearly enough to take the speck out of our sister's and brother's eye, we hope that your review process will allow you to re-evaluate your Statement of Faith and other covenants and your relation to them.

We commend, celebrate, and support Dr. Hawkins. We wish her and you all the best, a reconciliation that will be a benefit to all concerned. In peace.

Sincerely,

Pamela Ayo Yetunde, ThD
Valerie Elverton Dixon, PhD
Rev. Lorena M. Parrish, PhD
Candace Laughinghouse, MDiv, ThM
Valerie Miles-Tribble, DMin, PhD
Rev. Patricia Haggler, PhD
Sofia Betancourt, PhD Candidate
The Rev. Cheryl S. Pero, PhD
Pamela R. Lightsey, PhD
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Cheryl Kirk-Duggan, PhD

Cc: the general public