

Descendants of Baylor Institute's Namesake Call for Removal of Associate Director

WACO, Texas—Twenty-nine members of the J.M. Dawson family have called on Baylor University to remove the associate director of the institute that bears Dawson's name.

In an open letter dated Sept. 11, Dawson family members question the appointment of Francis Beckwith as associate director of Baylor's J.M. Dawson Institute of Church-State Studies.

However, two of Beckwith's key colleagues have claimed the protest is misguided, affirmed Beckwith's qualifications and championed Baylor's right to select a diverse faculty.

Dawson was a 1904 Baylor graduate who served as pastor of First Baptist Church of Waco 32 years. In retirement, he became the first executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs in Washington. His 1948 book, *Separate Church and State Now*, is considered a landmark treatise on church-state separation and religious liberty.

In their open letter, the Dawson family members say they have asked Baylor President Robert Sloan to remove Beckwith as associate director of the Dawson Institute and reassign him to "another, more appropriate, position."

Matt Dawson, J.M. Dawson's son and a retired Baylor law professor, and Alice Cheavens Baird, a granddaughter from Waco, signed the letter. Including that pair, the letter carries the names of one child, 12 grandchildren and 16 great-grandchildren. Fourteen of them are Baylor graduates.

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The letter accuses Beckwith of holding church-state positions contrary to the strong stand for separation advocated by J.M. Dawson. Therefore, he should not be a leader of the Dawson Institute, it notes.

“We are troubled because Dr. Beckwith is a fellow of the Discovery Institute. The activities of this organization are widely recognized in the academic community as engaging in political activities that contravene the fundamental principle of the separation of church and state for which J.M. Dawson stood,” the letter says.

“The Discovery Institute works to get the concept called ‘intelligent design’ into the science curriculum of public school textbooks, claiming that intelligent design is a scientific, not a religious, concept. In our judgment and in the judgment of the scientific community, this is a ruse for getting a religious notion into the public schools—clearly a violation of the separation of church and state.”

Intelligent design—a theory that counters evolution by advocating a rational plan behind creation—is not a new controversy at Baylor. The university’s faculty, particularly science and religion professors, protested more than three years ago, when President Sloan created the Michael Polanyi Center, intended to focus on whether mathematical and scientific formulas can prove an intelligent design behind creation.

“The vast majority of scientists view intelligent design as the latest version of creationist theory, though the Discovery Institute works tirelessly to refute this fact,” the Dawson family letter says.

It cites several articles in scientific and church-state journals that claim intelligent design actually is a religious theory rather than a scientific endeavor. Consequently, since intelligent design advocates attempt to introduce the theory into public school science classrooms, they violate longstanding principles of church-state separation, it adds.

“We ... ask the question: Is Baylor University going to maintain its commitment to the separation of church and state? Is the J.M. Dawson Institute of Church-State Studies going to remain committed to its mission? How can it possibly do so if an

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associate director is a fellow of the Discovery Institute, an organization that violates the church-state separation principle?" the letter asks.

In response, both Baylor Provost David Jeffrey and one of Beckwith's colleagues in the Dawson Institute, Barry Hankins, affirmed his fitness for leadership in the institute. The Dawson Institute's director, Derek Davis, was out of the country and unavailable for comment.

Beckwith topped the list of candidates for the Dawson Institute during a national search, Jeffrey said. Among Beckwith's credentials, Jeffrey cited his academic accomplishments, including a doctorate from Fordham University and a master's degree in juridical studies from Washington University, as well as publication of articles in numerous scholarly publications, including the Dawson Institute's own *Journal of Church and State*.

He has been a research fellow in the James Madison Program in American Ideals and Institutions at Princeton University, and he is a fellow in the Center for Science and Culture at the Discovery Institute. He has held full-time faculty appointments at Trinity International University, Whittier College and the University of Nevada at Las Vegas.

His latest book is *Law, Darwinism, & Public Education: The Establishment Clause and the Challenge of Intelligent Design*. Other books include *The New Mormon Challenge: Responding to the Latest Defenses of a Fast-Growing Movement*, *Do the Right Thing: Readings in Applied Ethics and Social Philosophy*, *Relativism: Feet Firmly Planted in Mid-Air*, *The Abortion Controversy 25 Years After Roe v. Wade*, *Affirmative Action: Social Justice or Reverse Discrimination?* and *Politically Correct Death: Answering the Arguments for Abortion Rights*.

"He's nuanced in some of his opinions, but we try to have diversity on the faculty here at Baylor. He's a proponent of separation of church and state," Jeffrey said. "He was the strongest candidate."

The Dawson family's protest reflects a double misunderstanding, Jeffrey

surmised.

“First is the actual nature of his (church-state) views,” the provost said, noting Dawson Institute Director Davis holds the same views.

“Second is the climate of intellectual freedom we want to have here at Baylor. At Baylor, we’re vigorous proponents of freedom of conscience and academic inquiry,” he added, noting the faculty represents a broad spectrum of views on their various disciplines.

The challenge to Beckwith, “apparently on the basis of his having received a grant and fellow status from an institute that specializes in intelligent design theory,” is dismaying, added Barry Hankins, associate professor of history and church-state studies in the institute.

“Frank’s views on the constitutionality of teaching intelligent design in public schools, however debatable, are scholarly and reasonable,” Hankins said. “I have found him a scholar of integrity and one who is always prepared to listen and dialogue about important matters.”

Hankins also debunked what he called rumors that have surfaced since Beckwith arrived at Baylor.

“It is simply not true that Frank was forced on the department by the administration,” Hankins insisted. “He was the best qualified person for the job and in my view strengthens the department, both because of his credentials as a scholar and because of his views on various church-state matters.

“There are faculty at Baylor who believe Frank should not have been hired because of his work on intelligent design or because he could be called a ‘cultural conservative.’ I believe the academic enterprise is strengthened when a variety of views are represented in institutes and departments where complex and controversial issues are to be debated. We are in the business of educating, not indoctrinating.”

For his part, Beckwith noted he is “surprised and saddened that the descendants of J.M. Dawson would invoke his name as an authority in their request that Baylor University take action that is contrary to the academic and religious liberty that ... Dawson stood for.”

Citing a 1964 quote from Dawson, “Most people know how sickly is mere conformity,” Beckwith added: “It is disappointing to know that some today are requiring ideological conformity for faculty at an institute that bears the name of J.M. Dawson. There can be no academic freedom if alumni are successful in their attempt to remove faculty who hold views contrary to their own.”

Beckwith, who in addition to his administrative position is associate professor of church-state studies, affirms the principles championed by the Dawson Institute, he said.

“I am a strong proponent of the separation of church and state as well as religious liberty, though in a free society such as ours, citizens of goodwill will differ on how to understand these principles in the 21st century, an era nearly a half-century removed from the time J.M. Dawson published the bulk of his work,” he said.

“For example, my scholarship on law, Darwinism and public education explores a new, important and fascinating question ...: Would certain critiques of Darwinism, including intelligent design theory, pass constitutional muster if subjected to standard judicial tests?”

Beckwith’s affiliations with think-tanks such as the Discovery Institute are merely affiliations, he stressed. “Think-tanks are not churches or lodges; there are no oaths or statements of faith that one must sign. ...

“My work is my own, and I stand by it. However, it is inappropriate and not in the spirit of J.M. Dawson’s philosophy for his descendants or any members of the Baylor community to blacklist faculty because they receive funding, however modest, from think-tanks and foundations with which other members of the

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academic community disagree.”

[Marv Knox](#) is editor of The Baptist Standard, where this story also appears.