

2nd Opinion: The last acceptable prejudice?

November 11, 2011

In early May 1990, after turning in final grades for the spring semester, my departmental chair walked into my office with a big smile on his face and handed me a letter from the university president. It was a non-renewal letter. I had been fired. Although I knew the chairperson would not do me any favors when I applied for tenure, I never suspected something like this was possible

By all accounts, I was doing well as an assistant professor. I had very high teaching evaluations, was publishing one or two articles per year in refereed journals, and to my knowledge, received the first federal grant in the history of my department. I was involved in a number of departmental committees and got along with faculty colleagues in my department.

Shortly thereafter, I scheduled an appointment with the provost, the second-most-powerful person on campus, to see if the decision might be reversed, an action the provost clearly had the authority to make happen. He started the meeting by stating: "I really like you. You're a very nice guy—an honorable person. But the reality is you simply don't fit in here." He then asked if he could give me some personal advice. "I think you need to consider getting a job teaching at some small Christian college, because that's where you'll really fit in." The provost then added: "Can I be honest with you? If you do end up at another state university, you are going to have the same problem you've had here."

I remember thinking to myself at that moment: He's essentially saying the "problem" has nothing to with my research, teaching or service. It was all about my visibility as a Christian. The pivotal point of the conversation

happened when I responded, "If I were a Marxist, we wouldn't even be having this conversation would we?" The provost nodded in agreement and stated, "You simply run against the grain ... and you need to end up at a place where your beliefs are a better fit than they are here."

Thankfully, the provost was only partially right. He was correct in his assessment that most universities would be uncomfortable with a faculty member who refused to keep faith a private matter. The provost was wrong, thankfully, in predicting I wouldn't survive at any state or secular university as long as I was an outspoken Christian. In spite of the fact I did not become a closet Christian—something the provost suggested I would need to do to survive—my career assumed a rather remarkable upward trajectory. Within a few years, I would be recruited by Vanderbilt University to launch and run a research center dedicated to the study of crime. Several years later, I would be recruited by the University of Pennsylvania to help launch and run another major research center.

After several years at Penn, I was approached by [Baylor University](#) and asked if I would consider launching at a new research center dedicated to the study of religion and public life. I turned down the offer because I was convinced an Ivy League platform coupled with partnerships with East Coast think tanks and sister Ivy League schools was the stage one needed to promote the serious study of religion in ways that would carry the most weight, especially among those apathetic or hostile toward religion.

But Baylor offered something far better and profoundly more important—a vision and commitment to build a world-class research university that is unapologetically faith-based, one that not only supports, but embraces, objective research on religion—let the chips fall where they may. What a contrast that would be to my experience at top secular universities, where faculty and administrators alike would cringe whenever we published and disseminated studies confirming the striking benefits of faith to mental, physical and social health.

The decision to come to Baylor in 2004 certainly was the right choice. Having directed research centers at five universities, and having interacted with colleagues at scores of other university research centers, Baylor has enthusiastically provided all the essentials for success—core funding, access to donors and the unequivocal support of the university administration. With a half-dozen distinguished professors, post-doctoral scholars and close to 100 resident and nonresident research fellows, the Institute for Studies of Religion has in seven years become the most muscular research center in the world dedicated to the scientific study of religion.

Byron Johnson is distinguished professor of the social sciences at Baylor University, director of [Baylor's Institute for Studies of Religion](#) and author of [More God, Less Crime: Why Faith Matters and How it Could Matter More](#).