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Baylor not immune to scholarly feud over origin of life

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by VAN DARDEN and JOSH HORTON, staff writer and contributor

With a federal judge's December decision against teaching theologically-based theories of evolution in Pennsylvania schools still reverberating among centers of education, the denial of tenure to Dr. Francis Beckwith has brought Baylor's previous commitment to studying intelligent design back to the tip of public dialogue.

Beckwith, associate professor of church-state studies, was denied tenure in March, an act some say is due to Beckwith's association with the Discovery Institute.

The Seattle-based institute, a secular, nonpartisan, nonprofit public policy center dealing with national and international affairs, states on its Web site that the theory of intelligent design holds that "certain features of the universe and of living things are best explained by an intelligent cause, not an undirected process such as natural selection." Beckwith is a fellow of the institute.

In the Apr. 14 issue of The Chronicle of Higher Education, Provost Randall O'Brien said Beckwith's "writings on intelligent design has absolutely nothing to do with the decision (to deny Beckwith tenure)."

Much of the controversy surrounding Baylor's involvement with teaching intelligent design has ebbed since the Michael Polanyi Center fell from the spotlight.

Former Baylor president Dr. Robert B. Sloan Jr. established the center, which was dedicated to intelligent design research, in October 1999 with many faculty members protesting its existence, saying the study of intelligent design had "creationist" undertones.

The administration formed a committee of faculty members to evaluate the center. They proposed it be renamed the Baylor Center for Science, Philosophy and Religion and moved into the Institute for Faith and Learning, a program established to study the role of religion in American higher education.

Dr. Bruce Gordon, the assistant director of the Polanyi Center, was named director of the remaining program after the previous director, Dr. William Dembski, was released from his Baylor contract.

Dr. Douglas Henry, director of the Institute for Faith and Learning, said that a "vestigial program in science, philosophy and religion continued for a year or two afterwards and that its reporting lines ran through the Institute for Faith and Learning."

Henry said the center was dissolved in 2003.

"When Baylor enrolled a smaller-than-expected entering class a few years ago and encountered concomitant financial pressures, the remaining 'program' was simply phased out," he said.

Dembski left Baylor for a position as professor of science and theology at Southern Seminary in Louisville in June 2005, having never taught a course at Baylor.

Dembski said he thought part of the controversy surrounding the Polanyi Center had to do with university politics, as the center "became the poster child of what Robert Sloan was doing with the university."

Many members of the faculty expressed concern at the time that Sloan was pushing an aggressive conservative agenda for the university.

"I think with the conservative-moderate split, there's just a lot of bad feeling and I think it's unfortunate that intelligent design got rolled into what's perceived as conservative fundamentalism and put that side of the aisle," Dembski said. "(The center) was stereotyped and demonized."

He said that, as a Christian school, Baylor should be a place where Christian ideas are debated.

"A flagship evangelical institution - at least that's what the 2012 vision says - is a place where these ideas can be freely discussed. I think it's shameful what's happened in the last five years," Dembski said.

Since the center was dissolved, many science professors have included intelligent design

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in their class discussions.

However, several professors who spoke on the condition of anonymity, said they don't consider intelligent design to be a part of valued scientific theory.

O'Brien said there's no official policy as to what can or can't be taught regarding intelligent design.

"To my knowledge, we don't have any policy that says that a professor must or may teach any particular approach to this subject," O'Brien said. "I think, obviously, as a scholar in the field, Baylor would expect professors to be on the cutting edge of the discourse in the field of study. And that, of course, is going to include the teaching of evolution as a science."

He said, however, that professors have the freedom to approach the subject in whatever manner they choose.

"I will say that the Provost's Office will not try to mandate what is taught in the classroom. We uphold academic freedom of the professor to conduct her or his class according to the personal approach that they'd like to take," O'Brien said. "Here at Baylor, we have the academic freedom to approach the subject as we will."

President John Lilley said there is no conflict between teaching evolution and teaching intelligent design because one is science and the other is theology.

"The Bible is not a book of science," Lilley said. "It wasn't meant to be a book of science. It's a book of faith and it is authoritative for our faith."

Lilley said science has a completely different methodology.

"What we have learned through science is something quite different (than what we learn through faith), and the church makes a huge mistake to fight with science," he said.

Charles Weaver, a professor of psychology and neuroscience who was a vocal opponent of the Polanyi Center at the height of the controversy, agrees with Lilley. He said there's nothing wrong with teaching intelligent design, but that it shouldn't be taught as a science.

"It's certainly a viable idea. It's just not one that ought to be considered science. It has no role in the science curriculum. If people want to teach it as philosophy or theology - certainly," Weaver said.

Charles Garner, professor of chemistry and biochemistry, said the core of the intelligent design debate comes down to differing worldviews.

"It ends up being more about interpretation of facts," Garner said. "Facts are not often in dispute. The interpretation of facts is what's in dispute."

Beckwith declined to comment on intelligent design, the Polanyi Center or the Baylor Center for Science, Philosophy and Religion because he said he was not at Baylor when any of the previous controversy occurred.

Lilley said the fact is that science will always win if it's pitted against narrowly-designed theology.

"If you understand theology appropriately, and understand that the Bible is our book of faith, (you understand that) it's authoritative for our faith," he said. "But don't confuse it as a book of science."

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