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University withdraws theologian's invitation after pressure from financial contributors

Joshua J. McElwee | Nov. 1, 2012

The University of San Diego has canceled a visiting fellowship for a British theologian less than two weeks before her scheduled arrival at the university because of pressure from financial contributors, according to a letter from the university's president.

Tina Beattie, a professor of Catholic studies at London's private University of Roehampton known for her work in contemporary ethical issues and Catholic understandings of feminism, received notice of the cancellation Oct. 27. She was scheduled to take residence at the university on Tuesday.

Beattie -- who also serves on the board of directors of the British Catholic weekly *The Tablet* and is a theological adviser to the Catholic Agency For Overseas Development, the Catholic aid agency for England and Wales -- announced the withdrawal of the invitation in an email to friends and other theologians Thursday.

Beattie said in an interview with *NCR* that cancellation of her fellowship was "symptomatic of something very new and very worrying."

"It's unheard of, certainly in Britain, for a theologian in my position to feel threatened by this kind of action," Beattie said. "It's not about me; it's about some change in the culture of the Catholic church that we should be very, very concerned about."

Prominent theologians in the U.S. and the UK called the university?s treatment of Beattie ?an insult? and ?dispiriting? and worried that it might have a chilling effect in the academic world. Several said they had written directly to university president Mary Lyons about the matter.

Calls to the University of San Diego for comment were not immediately returned Thursday.

Beattie said she was notified that her invitation to be a fellow at the university's Frances G. Harpst Center for Catholic Thought and Culture had been withdrawn in a letter from Lyons. (The letter can be read in full at the end of the article.)

In Lyons' letter, which Beattie shared in her email, Lyons writes that Beattie publicly dissents from church teaching.

"The Center's primary mission, consistent with those who have financially supported the Center, is to provide opportunities to engage the Catholic intellectual tradition in its diverse embodiments," Lyons wrote.

"This would include clear and consistent presentations concerning the Church's moral teachings, teaching with which you, as a Catholic theologian, dissent publicly. In light of the contradiction between the mission of the Center and your own public stances as a Catholic theologian, I regretfully rescind the invitation that has been extended to you."

In the letter, Lyons offers to reimburse Beattie for travel-related expenses and says she and the university "hope to mitigate any inconvenience this decision may have created for you."

Beattie asked Lyons to reconsider, but was told the decision was final, Beattie wrote in her email to friends.

Beattie was expected to be the focus of the center's Nov. 8 annual public lecture named for Emilia Switgall, a native Czech who fled communism during the Second World War.

While the website describing this year's lecture is no longer accessible, a cached copy of the page [1] states the lecture, "Visions of paradise: Women, sin and redemption in Christian art," was to focus on the "artistic representation of women's bodies" in late medieval and early Renaissance art.

"In literate societies such as ours, we very often lack the symbolic understanding which would enable us to 'read' pictorial signs in Christian art," the description states. "However, in pre-literate societies in western Europe, art was often a powerful medium for communicating theological ideas through the complex interweaving of symbolic and sacramental signs."

A receptionist at the university's Harpst Center said RSVPs are no longer being taken for the event.

While Beattie told *NCR* there was no clear indication of why Lyons considered her to be in dissent with the church, she said she experienced a similar cancellation in September after she signed a letter supporting same-sex marriage published in *The Times* of London in August.

A lecture Beattie planned to give Sept. 11 at the cathedral of the Clifton diocese in England as part of a series on the 50th anniversary of the Second Vatican Council was canceled after the publication of the letter, which included 26 other signatories.

Beattie said Clifton Bishop Declan Lang initially supported her giving the lecture after the letter's publication, but said he had been asked by the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to cancel the event.

Reactions from theologians to the cancellation of Beattie's fellowship were stark.

"This is an insult to a well-respected theologian who I know, whose work I know and who I think has always been entirely appropriate in the ways in which she's developed and expressed her views," Jean Porter, the John A. O'Brien Professor of Theology at the University of Notre Dame, told *NCR*.

"It is deeply dispiriting that the President of a Catholic University should characterize academic discussion and debate among Catholics as 'dissent,' and should seek to suppress academic exchange by black-balling an individual whom the Church has not condemned," Eamon Duffy, a professor of Christian history at the University of Cambridge and a former member of the Pontifical Historical Commission, wrote in an email to Lyons, which he shared with *NCR*.

Duffy cites the writing of 19th-century Catholic convert John Henry Newman in his letter.

Newman "criticized the 'shortsightedness' of those who 'have thought that the strictest Catholic University could by its rules and its teachings exclude' intellectual challenges to faith," Duffy wrote.

"The cultivation of the intellect involves that danger, and where it is absolutely excluded, there is no cultivation," writes Duffy, quoting Newman.

While Porter said she shared Beattie's concerns about academic freedom -- "This sort of thing is bound to have a chilling effect" on Catholic theologians and their work -- she also said her biggest concern "is for the well-being of the church."

"The church is starving itself through its reluctance and its fear to engage in really open and honest discussion about intellectual issues, matters of faith, and also matters of practice and church governance," Porter said.

"And I think you see signs at every turn that we're suffering gravely from that. I can't really imagine anything that could happen in the sphere of public debate and discussion that could be much more damaging to the church than what we're doing to ourselves right now."

"This action," Porter said, "is just one more sign of what is becoming a very serious and pervasive problem."

The University of San Diego is an independent Catholic institution first founded in 1952 through collaboration between the San Diego diocese and the Society of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, an international congregation of women religious.

Beattie's cancellation marks the university's second revocation of a fellowship from a prominent theologian in recent years. U.S. theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether, a Catholic feminism scholar, was disinvited in 2008 [2].

Reuther, currently a visiting professor of feminist theology at the Claremont School of Theology in California, had been asked to hold the Msgr. John R. Portman Chair in Roman Catholic Theology at the University of San Diego for 2009-2010 before her invitation was withdrawn.

Beattie had also been set to give a reflection at a prayer breakfast at the university upon her arrival before she was disinvited. The text of that reflection can be read below.

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Letter From President of UCD [3]

Beattie Reflections [4]

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