

Telling on Themselves: A Story of Institutional Betrayal in Christian Higher Education

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What counts as a threat to an institution depends upon how you define the institution. If the core of the institution is the people whose daily work manifests the institution's mission and advances its stated goals, what hurts those people and hinders that mission will be a threat. If the core of the institution is a select few individuals in seats of power, their projection of themselves and their identity onto the institution, and a select constituency that ensures the continuing impact of structural inequity, then threats to those interests will be a threat to the institution itself. My story of the ups and downs of a 25-year association with a particular Christian college revolves around a struggle over how to answer questions about institutional identity. The school's dramatic final betrayal of that long commitment reveals both predictable patterns as well as opportunities for courageous change. I offer this narrative and accompanying analysis in the hope that it will encourage attention to the role of institutional identity questions in institutional betrayal as well as institutional courage, especially in Christian higher education.

In the spring of 2021, my longtime employer and alma mater forced me from my faculty position in response to an organized social media campaign explicitly committed to punishing me for consistently speaking out against injustice. The institution, which I will refer to here as "Christian College," claimed that it initiated proceedings against me because I had threatened and intimidated people, even as a local police officer with family ties to the college hosted a public conversation that included threats against me and implied threats to my family. Given the outsize influence on primarily White institutions like Christian College by White Christian nationalism, with its commitment to a divinely mandated social order (Gorski & Perry, 2022) of top-down patriarchal authority, violent anti-Blackness, and persecution of the LGBTQ+ community, the institution's actions functioned less as an aberration and more as a continuation of patterns of harm in a long refusal to fully manifest its identity as a Christian higher education

institution. At the same time, the institution's refusal to manifest its most elevated religious and educational values was not inevitable. The seeds of institutional courage were present within the very aspects of the institution which leaders chose to regard as threats.

I use the term White Christian nationalism here not to claim a particular extremism on the part of Christian College but to highlight the way that this ideology, so pervasive in the United States, elides the gulf between God and White Christian men, such that God's supremacy is interchangeable with their supremacy in society at all levels (Whitehead & Perry, 2020). In the unifying narratives of White Christian nationalism, a challenge to the ascendancy of White Christian men is a threat to their identity as God's avatars and thus an attack on God. Absent the man who rules as God's proxy over the many, there is no legitimate family, nation, assembly, or institution. By contrast, religious scholars describe and multitudes of faithful Christians, myself among them, affirm contrasting depictions of God in which God identifies God's self with the powerless and marginalized. In only one example of a direct rejection of White Christian nationalism's identification of White men with the divine, Womanist theologian Christena Cleveland details the violence with which White Christians greet any challenge to this identification of God with White male authority, and explores the holiness of the Sacred Black Feminine which "whitemalegod" excludes (2022).

Coined by Freyd in 2008, the term "institutional betrayal" denotes "when an institution causes harm to an individual who trusts or depends upon that institution, including failure to prevent or respond supportively to wrongdoings by individuals committed within the context of the institution" (Smith & Freyd, 2014, p.578). Characterizing this type of harm as betrayal implies that some important, good expectation has not been met, and positions the institution not merely as a source of disappointment, but as a betrayer. Institutional betrayal is a moral wrong

that includes not only harm flowing from actions or failure to act, but also the compounding harm stemming from the source of that harm: in order to betray, one has to first present oneself as trustworthy. The nature of the institution and of the relationship existing between the institution and the person it betrays compounds and shapes an experience of institutional betrayal. By contrast, institutional courage denotes “. . . a pledge to protect and care for those who depend on the institution . . . a compass oriented to the common good of individuals, institutions, and the world . . . a force that transforms institutions into more accountable, equitable, effective places for everyone” (Center for Institutional Courage).

When I came to Christian College as a first-year college student some 25 years ago, I did not recognize, much less appreciate, the strange modifier it invoked to describe itself: “Reformed” to me meant prison reform, or perhaps Martin Luther and 95 of something or other, not the specific religious and intellectual tradition in which it stands. What I did understand was that in correspondence I felt as if college representatives regarded me as a person rather than a generic target for canned religious jargon. After a rough adjustment period in which I struggled to get my bearings, I returned to campus for a second semester to discover that someone had switched on a metaphysical lodestone: this place was now my home. The sense of being reoriented was significant, and the growing consciousness of my own identity, as if I were coming home to myself, was even stronger. It was not theology classes but my first philosophy class in this tradition which delivered the revelation that God loved my whole self, not just the religious bits or moral denial of this or that worldly activity as a “good girl” ought. Non-religious family members affirmed my voracious thirst for understanding, my powerful mind, and my incorrigible stubborn streak when it came to fairness; but no religious authority had ever before acted as if those parts of me meant something to God. While it was disorienting to first notice

and then reject the sacred/secular dualism I had held, practicing philosophy within this tradition reoriented me to the world around me, and situated me fully within that world as simultaneously believer and knower. I no longer experienced myself as religious and intellectual by turns but as a unity. As I studied, started student groups, designed costumes, delivered office supplies, tutored, sang, competed in arts festivals, and gave papers, I put down deep roots even as I left my own mark. Few have known and loved more of Christian College and its campus than I, even before my stint as administrative staff to a newly minted provost, and before I returned to campus to teach in an adjunct capacity while I wrote my dissertation.

Hired at Christian College to fill a half-time philosophy faculty position upon completing my PhD, I soon encountered the first of many threats to my employment. One week before Christmas, administrators called in the entire custodial staff and fired them without warning, as a cost-saving measure. These were people I had worked with during my years as a student, and it shocked me when the institution which had originally persuaded me that one's faith can and ought to inform all of one's practice showed me that when pressed, they would not act according to their ideals. As a newly appointed contingent faculty member of a tiny department likely to be the next victim of downsizing, I had no power to restore staff to their jobs. As a member of the community and as an ethicist, however, I could refuse to pretend that nothing had happened and help others find a way to act on the moral obligation many of us felt. When I organized a drive to fill homemade cards with cash, job contacts, and good wishes for our former colleagues, a vice president warned me that I did so at risk to my job.

The second time a (different) vice president threatened my job was when I shared with them an analysis I had written, which had been intended for the student newspaper until it was shuttered, on what I perceived as the difference between our college as us, its people, and the

institution as a paper fantasy: alive in mission statements and the carefully orchestrated student tableaux of Admissions mailings but not in community members' experience. Haunted by the way we had fired custodians after underpaying them and denying them resources for so many years, I was convinced that it was time for us to live up to the values that we claimed as an institution. Our Christian identity, I wrote, ought to mean that we acted more like Jesus even (or especially) in how we dealt with a budget crisis:

[w]e have not lived up to our mission "to subject all cultural activities to the reign of God." On the contrary, we have simply adopted standard Higher Education business practices as if they do not also need to be redeemed. Because of this, we are top heavy, power heavy, and fearful of each other: a read through our handbook reveals that we demand employees render a perfect observance of every jot and tittle of the law and blindly trust in the non-specified beneficence of an institution. (Vanden Bout, 2015)

That meeting ended abruptly. Even though Christian College itself had taught me this precept, to speak on this topic was "above my pay grade," a potent threat from the administrator then deliberating on whether to close the philosophy department entirely. I knew that in such circumstances, "[w]hen you expose a problem you pose a problem. It might then be assumed that the problem would go away if you would just stop talking about it or if you went away" (Ahmed, 2017, p. 37). Yet had no one named this failure to value these important community members it would still be true that our institution failed to act according to our claims about who we are and what we do. The wound would exist and so would the betrayal.

The third thing I did that drew threats to my employment was to organize a public statement of solidarity with Muslims with my colleagues in response to the "Muslim Ban" enacted by the U.S. government in January 2017, and then to encourage fellow employees to

sign a public statement organized by a sister school (A Statement of Confession and Commitment, 2017). Our little college did itself proud, especially the many junior staff and faculty who put their names to this statement despite the vulnerability of their positions. My department chairperson courageously stepped in and took my place at a meeting requested by the personally incensed new college president, who grilled my colleague for our failure to restrict ourselves to engaging the matter through his office. That we had instead opted to invite our (very) new institutional leader to involve himself if he wished had been, it seemed, received as a threat to his authority as the proper embodiment of the institution.

The finer details of chronology for other threats I received for speaking out on matters of justice begin to blur together; there were just so many of them, both implicit and explicit. It was exhausting and frightening. Though I was angry and that anger gave me strength, real anger is not something a nice White lady is encouraged to express, unless that anger is directed in select ways, such as toward other women. Anger, after all, is an expression of power and a claim about what is deserved. As a woman, even a White woman, to display anger about mistreatment from White Christian men is to invite blame, and my own cultural and religious acclimation had long since communicated the expectation that a woman must put her own needs last in order to meet with approval. I began to privately document attempts to silence me, using my anger to help me resist the pressure to conform and holding tightly to my belief that anger was a healthy response, lest I agree with attackers that my anger, not their culpable action, was the problem.

Some threats stand out, like the white supremacist who published my workplace information in relation to the terror of events in Charlottesville, Virginia in August 2017, and the member of an associated denomination who tried to pressure my superiors into firing or demoting me for speaking in ways he disapproved of about abortion, my particular area of

expertise. At one point, an administrator for a denominational social media page devoted to social justice publicly claimed that my opinion as a Christian ethicist on the subject of abortion was against church teaching. That denomination explicitly rejects making such *ex cathedra* edicts on scholars speaking within their sphere of expertise; nevertheless, it was only after two more senior colleagues joined me in requesting the anathema be withdrawn that the page was willing to renounce its claim against my work. I was to find out later that at least one local church tried to get me censured or fired for teaching about the existence of intersex and transgender people in my bioethics course and for insisting that they too deserve respect and care.

My research, teaching, and what my department chair liked to call my “public scholarship” flowed into and out of each other. The more I paid attention, the less I could escape the immediacy of moral obligation for my neighbor’s wellbeing or deny the structural patterns of the harm they experienced. When I gave students readings from Archbishop Desmond Tutu on human intersubjectivity (Battle, 2009) as a counterpoint to Ayn Rand’s argument for selfishness as both objective and the proper basis of ethics (1961), I was changed and challenged as much as anyone else by the prospect that my wellbeing and development was linked to that of others, and by the idea that it is only together that we are fully ourselves and fully human. I gave papers and talks, and hosted panels exploring these themes so that we could learn more, together. In my classes, brave students taught me what I should have known already: ethics is never just a series of ideas to debate and compare. Ethics is always people’s real lives, their experience, and whether or not we will treat their value as subject to compromise or denial. I became an organizer on campus, seeking out institutional experts and collaborating with them so that more people could benefit from their knowledge. Where I might have begun to see a problem or

perhaps had understood a single aspect of that problem in the context of a scholarly project, one or more actual institutional experts had invariably been working to address Christian College's particular manifestation of that problem in their own spheres for years. We found additional partners and devised events that taught our colleagues about teaching in times of crisis, encouraged them to take good risks in the classroom when students just want the "correct" answer, helped them really grapple with what it meant to treat diversity as normal rather than something to sprinkle on top of our pedagogy, and more. Together with justice-minded colleagues and students, we worked on a wide range of events and projects, leaning expressly on our institution's articulation of Christian commitment to help more members of our community explore what responding to needs and opportunities could look like in their own spheres.

One such group, as part of a strategic campaign to push our college to finally grapple with our institution's baked-in white supremacy, was successful in motivating the Board of Trustees to publicly affirm that at Christian College, "[w]e believe that Black lives matter because we believe the Gospel of Jesus Christ." The most powerful group at the college, and the one which most clearly embodies the institution's troubled legacy, publicly took sides with racially marginalized members of our community out of concern for the structural violence visited on them by our society, citing our institution's most basic religious commitment as justification. This concretized the aspirational values of our mission and affirmed that those members with the least power and the greatest risk of being harmed are at the core of our community. That Christian College did so, and did not wait for consensus from sister institutions or focus instead on mitigating angry backlash from its majority White constituency, makes this decision to instantiate its identity as a Christian institution of higher learning a moving example of institutional courage.

As we worked from the inside to help our institution become more and more what it had long promised its students and other constituencies, we justice collaborators used our own positions and areas of responsibility to implement the insights and feature the gifts our administrators had not valued. We talked to each other about costs to our careers and the ways bias shows up in student feedback, especially for all of us who are not White and male. We helped each other to remember that, in Koritha Mitchell's words,

[v]aluing the judgments of people whom this country insists upon holding to incredibly low standards is dangerous; one must hone the skill of avoiding that trap. Otherwise, members of marginalized groups will believe the nation's relentless assertion that they should never feel secure in claiming space. (2018)

Female colleagues and I compared notes about inappropriate comments and assumptions we had encountered. At one point I had to stop using my office because a male student, who had attempted to physically intimidate me into reconsidering a final grade, had taken to haunting the hall near my door. Male faculty in neighboring offices were willing to keep an eye out for me so I felt safer, but no one encouraged me to make a report. I wonder now what might have been different had I spoken instead with the other female faculty member with an office in the same building. When I confided in a nice White male faculty colleague about my concerns regarding how well administrators, who had not themselves progressed beyond an "I don't see color" approach, would interpret students' resentment at having to engage material that disrupted their comfortable beliefs about the world, he laughed at my concern. Didn't I know people liked me? Who did I think was going to fire me?

With few exceptions, the message to me in these experiences was clear: administrators' beneficence and their appreciation for my feminine niceness would have to be sufficient, and

harms to me would be ignored. Certainly my claims to White (cis)ladyhood are strong: married and a mother, I was known for baking scones for my classes and delivering extras across campus offices, I crocheted during stressful meetings to stave off panic attacks, and my physical presence is such that people hold open doors and call me “Miss” or “Ma’am” in public. Aware of the extra protection these aspects of my identity afforded me, I believed then as I do now that I have a moral obligation to accept risk rather than passing it on to colleagues more likely to be targeted due to structural inequalities like racism. In the end, however, White ladyhood is only for those who do not challenge White supremacy, so I knew what regard for my “niceness” was worth.

My identity offered some protection, but misogyny, understood not as a blanket hatred of all women as such, but as describing a range of actions punishing women for challenging male dominance (Manne, 2017), played a significant role in my experience at Christian College. Though the school rejects explicit forms of gender discrimination in ways that set it apart from other religious institutions, nevertheless, the unmistakable contours of misogyny wind through my employment at Christian College, featuring prominently in my first committee assignment. I was appointed to the Foundations committee, which was gearing up for a major overhaul to the entire program. The committee’s mandate had considerable overlap with my areas of contractual responsibility, on the strength of which I had been hired. That was unfortunate for me, given senior members’ plans. To deal with the problem of having a junior faculty member make claims from her expertise which challenged those plans, senior male administrators serving on the committee began to respond to my contributions with accusations: I possessed no distinctive insights they could not as easily provide from their own respective areas, and my suggestions were no more than selfish attempts to make curriculum changes in order to benefit myself personally. Pointing to the small size of my department sufficed as justification for further

minimizing philosophy's contributions; when I countered with a description of philosophy's distinctive role in the school's unusual approach to foundations courses or identified courses I had designed which anticipated the committee's mandate, senior male colleagues interpreted that as a manipulative attempt to enlarge my half-time position. Other members could offer recommendations based on the particular strengths of their disciplines without receiving the same accusations.

I began experiencing adverse effects to my health because of the stress of this experience. After I reported this harm to committee leadership, the provost responded to my complaint by chasing me down when I left a meeting a few minutes early, in order to force me to take a face to face meeting with him over my report, a meeting I had already declined. He physically cornered me in an empty classroom and harangued me about his perception that I had failed to properly focus on the feelings of the powerful administrators, himself included, whose disrespect and antagonism had left me with panic attacks. He did not stop berating me even though I was crying so hard it inhibited my speech. He did not stop when I told him I needed time to calm myself so I could teach my next class. I had to contradict him quite firmly when he attempted to characterize my distress as me apologizing for what he identified as my failure to appropriately consider the emotional comfort of the men who had harmed me. He left only after I had repeatedly insisted he do so that I might teach my class. He left too late. I had to email my best attempt at an alternate lesson plan to students who had already assembled in our classroom just down the hall, a painful hit to my own professional standards. Later, when I attempted to meet with the provost in hopes of finding a resolution that didn't involve having to pursue formal disciplinary avenues against him through Human Resources, he successfully dodged my requests for months. The experience was as illuminating as it was stressful. As Sara Ahmed notes,

[t]o make a complaint within an institution is to learn about how institutions work, what I call institutional mechanics. To tell the story of a complaint made within an institution can be to tell another story about an institution. The story of complaint often counters the institution's story of itself. (2021)

I had become a problem to my provost, and thus college procedures did not apply. The next time the provost would agree to meet with me was to sign off on plans for me to serve as department chair during the upcoming sabbatical of my sole full-time colleague. My service as department chair, which included teaching six classes and supporting adjunct colleagues through the transition to online teaching when COVID hit, kept me too busy to pursue the matter further until enough time had passed that I judged it unlikely anyone would take the matter seriously. While exacerbated by the pandemic (Tugend, 2020), this level of overwork is endemic to higher education (Griffin, 2022), and functions as additional pressure to act in a constant state of survival mode, restricting an institution's capacity to "seek the truth and engage in moral action, despite unpleasantness, risk, and short-term cost" and to "protect and care for those who depend on the institution" (The Center for Institutional Courage).

When George Floyd was murdered by Minneapolis police officers, my community was as sharply divided as the rest of my country. When the original police report was made public, I reached back to that blistering denunciation in N.W.A.'s 1988 album for the only words that fit, tweeting out my "Fuck the police" from the private social media account I reserved for interacting with scholars and activists and kept separate from my faculty position at Christian College. A week later, I received an email from my provost, asking for a meeting so that he might share unspecified complaints made against me, and so that I could respond to them. He indicated that my department chair would be present in a "support and listening" role. The next

day, when a local police officer with family ties to the college began an organized harassment campaign against me using a cropped screenshot of my “Fuck the police” tweet, the provost contacted me to push the meeting up, and described my words (but not those of members of the broader community harassing and threatening me) as harming Christian College. He acknowledged that the institution “cannot ask employees to take any action with regard to personal social media accounts” but claimed that my words had harmed colleagues and the community, and thus he was empowered to insist that at minimum I take the post down. I had already reached out to my department chair privately as the person most directly tasked with ensuring the institution protected my professional status to tell him about the harassment campaign, which included public comment from current students, faculty colleagues, and members of our community. He countered with a description of harm to the college and to our department, as if I were involved in neither, and insisted I remove the post. This response showed me that he did not regard me as transgressed against but as transgressor, and I immediately ceased appealing to him for help as my immediate superior. When the requested meeting was held, I was stuck having to ask that they recognize that my department chair could not be regarded as my support. The three administrators present (the head of Human Resources, the provost, and my department chair) rejected my statement, so I was forced to meet without promised support or protections.

The meeting itself was a nightmare. The provost and the HR representative contradicted themselves and each other with regard to the role my tweet with its vulgarity played in what was obviously some sort of disciplinary proceeding. I was not allowed to know the details of complaints, only that unnamed members of the community reported finding me intimidating for unspecified reasons about unspecified speech acts on my part. I asked the administrators at the

meeting to facilitate a conversation with any community members with negative feelings regarding engaging me, and reminded them of my exemplary record of cultivating respectful dialogue on divisive topics in my classroom, and at campus-wide and public events. They did not engage these data points, and instead pressured me to offer an unrestricted apology. I refused. At one point, the provost accused me of “sexual violence” in my words because in a separate social media post I had criticized our cultural fetishization of police officers by likening it to masturbation. The visceral anger with which he received my clarification on this matter showed me that this meeting was deeply unsafe, and that all attempts on my part to offer evidence, ask questions, or point out inconsistencies would be interpreted as culpable rejection of their authority and thus of the institution’s values. My professional status or personal wellbeing was no concern of the college, my record was not evidence, and my scholarly expertise was not authoritative. The only words they would accept from me were an unrestricted apology accepting all negative feelings experienced by anyone in the context of any utterance from me as both my responsibility and proof of my transgression. I refused.

A few days went by in silence. I consulted with senior colleagues who reassured me that though the administration might have been angry, it had no grounds to discipline me based on their deep understanding of handbook regulations and policies governing faculty members. They advised me to weather the storm or offer an apology as appeasement, and suggested that the provost, warmly appreciated by a majority of my colleagues for his many good qualities and energetic efforts on our behalf in other areas, must have been attempting to placate donors. After the campus hosted the funeral services for a major donor, the provost reached out three times in twelve hours to request a follow-up meeting. The only day he was available turned out to be the only day I was not; he characterized this as refusing to meet with him. That same day, I

discovered that I was locked out of all my college accounts and that he had sent an email to my personal account terminating my employment, which he characterized as a “nonrenewal.”

The pettiness still stings. Since I used an automatic “out of office message” for email outside of business hours he told me that he expected that meant I had already turned in my grades. I would be paid (on a lower pay scale) for work I had already completed but which for budgetary reasons was being attributed to my next contract period. I was barred from graduation the next day; my students looked for me in vain. I am still banned from campus, and the college denied even my request that my students would receive notification that someone else would grade their final assignments and issue their grades. There was nothing I could do to protect my students from the new set of eyes that would read what were often very personal stories woven into their final projects. I could not contact them to warn them or tell them that the radio silence in response to things that my students often shared in final papers, like coming out to me, confiding religious doubts, or requesting feedback about new ideas, was not my response to the trust they had extended. I could not reassure them that I was not rejecting them or warn them that a person to whom they had not offered their stories had received them in my stead. Contrary to innumerable institutional pledges, my students’ wellbeing was not regarded as important to the institution’s wellbeing. They too were betrayed by Christian College.

There was an appeal process, of a sort. It involved a small group of colleagues selected for such service who would evaluate my appeal and the accusation made by the provost along with supporting documents. The provost would, unlike me, participate as a member of this group up until the point of casting a vote in the final decision. The colleague who represented my interests on that appeal committee has my eternal gratitude, and no one could have done more for me. This colleague and a few brave others unconnected to the appeal process who intervened or

testified on my behalf, almost all of whom were at additional levels of vulnerability because of marginalized identities and/or contingent employment status, highlighted with their individual courage the opportunities our college rejected when it chose institutional betrayal over institutional courage. As painful as my experience was, they did not allow me to go through it alone, and they still embody to me the very best of the institution I loved.

To this appeal committee I offered evidence that the effort to oust me had everything to do with the content of my speech and not merely mode of expression, and that to administrators, my speech as a private citizen bluntly criticizing injustice was the same culpable action of which they believed me guilty within the institution. In my appeal, I argued that

[t]he problem isn't this Christian ethicist speaking directly about how bad injustice is, using words sharp enough to break the social niceness compact that protects White supremacy. The problem is and will continue to be that same White supremacy and its accompanying satanic pantheon of injustices, until we cast down our idols and turn our hands to God's work of bending the moral arc of the universe toward justice.

In addition, I shared examples from Christian scripture and key insights from social justice leaders that illuminate the way appeals to "niceness," tone, delivery, or moderation of speech function not as a neutral or cooling influence on contested matters but as opposition to justice-seeking activity and as an active source of harm.

In the letter informing me that I had been removed from my position, the provost wrote regarding the timeline for the initial meeting that "[w]e accelerated the meeting . . . so we could discuss some recent communications of yours that I believe exemplified the concerns underlying my original request for a meeting and that were actively causing concern and distress for members of the campus community." Here he refers to my "Fuck the police" tweet and to

unspecified other social media posts decrying injustice or criticizing institutions, and equates them with unspecified complaints from individuals somewhere within the college community. In my written appeal I gave examples of real threats and acts of intimidation I had endured by way of illuminating the absence of any such acts on my part. The provost opted to identify himself as the unnamed figure to which I had alluded in one example in order to claim that it was not I but he and other senior administrators who had been the target of intimidation, characterizing my leaving a meeting early in the following way: I had “abruptly walked out on a Foundations Committee meeting, in apparent frustration or anger with the direction of the meeting.” He then claimed that this “impacted the committee’s ability to engage productively without fear of [my] reaction.” Furthermore, he characterized my comportment as “the kind of hostile and unproductive communication that has led [him] to [his] decision.” Taken together, the provost’s testimony to the committee argued that the threats and intimidation he alleges I offered and on the basis of which I was denied a contract were delivered by me to senior administrators by means of leaving a meeting early after having reported harm I experienced at their hands. Further, he claimed that this was the same transgression I had committed regarding unnamed community members who had complained that they were worried I might shame them if they engaged me in discussion, and that this was the same as the action of making social media posts as a citizen which decried anti-Black violence and anti-trans hate.

This bizarre linkage—from an administrator’s personal feelings regarding the possibility that they had wronged me, to community members’ amorphous complaints about possibly speaking with me, and again to my blunt social media denunciations of injustice as a citizen—was echoed by my department chair and powered his role in proceedings against me. After my department chairperson testified against me, I shared with the appeal committee records of a

conversation we had had over text in which I had asked privately, with regard to something I had taught him, that we not present our department as the institutional expert but instead help our colleagues recognize the real institutional expert in that area, a Black woman staff member. I also explained that it hurt me when he offered himself as an expert by sharing what I had taught him, after I had already redirected the inquiry to a more appropriate party. Hearing about the difference between impact and intent in this context was enough for him to feel that he, and therefore Christian College, was in existential danger. He did not share his feelings with me at the time, but I learned later that he began to meet with the provost over their shared sense that I had attacked them, long before that meeting in which I was not allowed to gainsay his role as designated support person. Some months after that conversation about who functioned as an institutional expert in a particular area, several colleagues and I were developing a set of resources and suggestions for faculty intended to improve equity in online teaching. When a member of our group shared a resource on their private social media page, my chairperson asked us to “retract” it, and described our actions in sharing the resource as “issu[ing] declarations that . . . because I have chosen a particular communication mode, I am a deluded and obtuse fool at best, and maybe a cruel and heartless torturer.” He described our plan to circulate a resource detailing detrimental effects on students stemming from requiring cameras during online classes, as “providing explosive ammunition for people to simply cancel those who, perhaps for complex and thought-out reasons, have chosen an imperfect technology as the best option,” affirming a commitment to “robust and ongoing discussion of enacting justice in online teaching” but pleading with us that we “not start it off by demonizing the teaching practices of some,” finally asking that we retract the post so that he could work with us rather than “fighting defensively against [us].” To the two men who had worked together to remove me from my post, the real

threat was not actual harm experienced by community members but discomfort at the possibility that they were implicated in harm. It is through leaps like this that maintaining the unquestioned supremacy of White men in power becomes, or is revealed as, the institution's real identity.

It did not matter that I could demonstrate these links from administrators' own words, or that I could show that, far from offering threats or intimidation towards community members, I had been the recipient of them. It did not matter that leaders from marginalized groups across various community constituencies testified to the committee that I embodied our school's mission or that unlike the majority of my colleagues, I made them feel safe. It did not matter that institutional experts on the role of imprecatory speech, on the finer details of obligations owed to faculty by the institution, and on best practices for facilitating conversations on topics like structural racism testified on my behalf. It did not matter that contested speech acts were on topics closely related to my area of expertise as a scholar or that the college handbook quotes maximal language on academic freedom protections due to faculty from the American Association of University Professors (1940 statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and tenure). None of that mattered, because Christian College could appeal to its identity as a religious school, exempting them from legal statutes protecting employee rights. Historically, Christian organizations in the United States have played a notable role in opposing legal decisions codifying protected rights for marginalized groups. Balmer (2014) traces the rise of the religious right not to abortion but to the federal government's denial of tax exempt status of private Christian schools which had denied admission to Black children in defiance of the Civil Rights Act, while religious institutions still enjoy substantial carve-outs to protections secured by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA National Network, 2018). When Christian College

used its religious identity to secure an exception to rules governing educational bodies, that was not an outlier.

Ultimately, my dangerous transgression was that I habitually make people feel that their innocence is in danger of being questioned. In White spaces, especially White Christian spaces, failure to assume the rightness of power, particularly that of White Christian men, is functionally an attack on good order and even God himself. I offered a “threat” to the institution as my superiors defined it every time I refused to grant an exemption ahead of time to my listeners. I spoke as if it was possible that they themselves and our institution might be a part of the problem. It did not matter that I spoke openly about where I was discovering my own complicity, rooting out my own prejudices, and remedying my own ignorance. When I spoke about injustice I did so as if it were real and happening now and as if no one were safe.

By contrast, these men could trust themselves to do things correctly and safely, operating from their certainty that they were the “good guys” because they meant well. When they were angry, used strong language, or yelled at colleagues during Faculty Association meetings, that did not signify improper behavior. As unbiased authorities they would ensure any discussion did not impose upon those like themselves whose intentions were pure. So it was that, days after ousting me, the provost hosted a faculty event featuring a storied leader of South Africa’s anti-apartheid movement. I had intervened the day the provost offered to solve racism at the college with a “listening” committee of faculty members, who would receive the travails of racially marginalized students and absolve them of any hurts. With himself as facilitator, the college would be in no danger of grappling with the prospect that a historical system of legal segregation and anti-Black violence had a corollary in the present. On a similar timeline, my department chair formed the first faculty-sponsored affirming LGBTQ+ student group on campus. I had been

there to redirect when he would have forced a student to out themselves to a homophobic colleague without considering the prospect of harm. It keeps me up at night, thinking about the way so many nice White Christians are driven to protect their sense of being pure, and thus approved by God, at the expense of their marginalized neighbor in need. Community members need more than an authority figure's faith in his own good intentions.

Let me not write as if Christian College were particularly terrible in either its religious expression or its educational offerings. The opposite is closer to the truth. It prides itself on being more welcoming, more liberal, more ecumenical, more tolerant than sister institutions. That pride is not misplaced: it is in fact less beholden to denominational control, fostering a community that is on the whole kinder and less segregated, and offers an education which is more explicitly respectful of intellectual freedom. It does not demand rigid adherence to a particular set of religious answers but offers a touchingly gracious and inclusive definition of what counts as Christian faith. My experience of betrayal, and the pain my former colleagues still feel, stems from Christian College's failure to protect a version of our community that has yet to be fully realized, because it has yet to value marginalized members as essential to the institution's identity. It has failed to act as if it were true that, when we as members of this body were well, the institution was well, or that when members were threatened and targeted for abuse, the collective body was harmed.

The full weight of this story is something I have only begun to feel in its entirety. The loss comes from my experience of institutional betrayal and also from missing the professor and colleague I was to that community. I cannot stop myself from making mental notes about new resources, sketching out breakthroughs in how to communicate complex ideas, or dreaming up creative projects for this or that class I may never teach again. I still make notes and email

myself about leads for a book I am no longer likely to write. When former students contact me for letters of recommendation I have to caution them to consider whether the recipient is likely to select against them based on my name at the bottom, no matter how glowing the recommendation. Former colleagues have let me know that they feel deeply unsafe; some have rejected contracts over how I was treated. Years of notes, research, and professional contacts are simply gone. I had to say goodbye to treasured emails from my student days like my adored, departed grandmother's all caps messages and my husband's first love notes. Christian College would only agree to return those to me if I gave them blanket permission to read my emails, and I cannot risk them reading the other messages in my inbox from students who shared deeply personal things with their professor; some of my students were only "out" to me because they had no one else that felt safe. I expect that Christian College took the steps they did—locking me out of accounts, forbidding me from attending graduation that weekend, and refusing to tell my students that someone else was reading and grading their final papers—from some combination of legal concerns, the desire to placate conservative White donors, and the harmful but common impulse of power to "keep things quiet." My alma mater harmed me personally and professionally, they intimidated my colleagues, and they hurt my students. It's the last that still brings me to tears, eighteen months out.

When I consider what I experienced and witnessed, testimony about more (or worse) in the past or about what is ongoing, I am very angry. I know better than perhaps anyone else that this was not inevitable, because so much of what is best in me is from or developed within my former community. Those like me who have been scapegoated by the fearful powerful at the top of our institutions' hierarchies will continue to embody the stated values of the institutions that

betrayed us. This passage, written after administrators fired our custodial staff and tried to repress any discussion of that event, rings as true now as it did back then:

This past year and throughout our history, we have often treated faithful and beloved members of our community as threats, as if the real [Christian College], the one we ought to protect, were the one on paper or in public opinion. But it is not. [Christian College] is us: the community itself, students, staff, and faculty. When we hurt the real [Christian College] to protect a fiction, we reveal a failure to make our love for each other a structural reality rather than a taken-for-granted trait of individuals (Vanden Bout, 2015).

In their recent choices, the leaders of my former institution, precisely in the way they projected onto the institution their personal sense of being threatened by my calls for justice, revealed an institutional identity in the old and ugly pattern of White Christian nationalism. By choosing to interpret calls for justice as a threat to themselves and thus our institution, they excluded me and marginalized members of our community from institutional identity, a betrayal of Christian College's claims about itself and a rejection of past examples of institutional courage. Nevertheless, the possibility of future institutional courage remains, living on in the pull of unfulfilled aspiration in its highest precepts, and within those members whose lives and work prefigure the realization of an institutional identity worthy of them because it finally recognizes them as its core.

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