

Religion scholar boycotts BYU conference to protest university policy

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October 8, 2015

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(RNS) Brigham Young University has convened its annual International Law and Religion Symposium this week, featuring around 90 scholars, political leaders and jurists from more than three dozen nations.

But that number will not include Mark Juergensmeyer, a past president of the American Academy of Religion and the author of *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*.

Juergensmeyer, professor of sociology and global studies, and affiliate professor of religious studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara, was scheduled to speak at the conference Wednesday (October 7) but withdrew for reasons of conscience.

On Saturday, he received an email from the Free BYU organization, which has for some time now been attempting to change the university's policy toward students who enter the school as Mormons but then either lose or change their religion during their time there.

Free BYU contacted all of the speakers for the conference to make them aware of what the organization has called "BYU's policy of terminating, evicting, and expelling LDS students who change their faith."

Under the policy, students who enter the university as Mormons but then undergo a faith transition can be expelled, evicted from student housing, and fired from on-campus jobs.

Free BYU asks that the university instead charge such students the full tuition rate that non-Mormons pay to attend the school. Full-time LDS undergraduates pay about \$2,500 a semester, while non-Mormons pay \$5,000.

Elizabeth Clark, associate director of BYU's International Center for Law and Religion Studies, told the *Salt Lake Tribune* that religious freedom extends to faith-based institutions, which have the right to determine their membership requirements.

Juergensmeyer was not aware of BYU's policy until Saturday and said it prompted him to cancel his appearance.

"I do feel badly about the organizers making all those efforts to bring me there, only to have it end with my not coming," Juergensmeyer said. "But I could not speak at a conference that is devoted in part to religious freedom, at an institution that seemed to be denying that freedom to its own students. I felt in an act of conscience I couldn't take part in such an event."

He contacted the university and made his regrets.

"One of the conference organizers expressed support for my decision as a matter of conscience, but she also gave a spirited defense of the university's policy, in part for financial reasons, since so much of the tuition comes from the offerings of the church," he explained.

Juergensmeyer said he has not heard of a comparable policy at any other religious university in the United States but that he has not made a particular study of the question.

"I do want to make clear that I mean no disrespect to BYU, the faculty, or the Mormon church," he said. "My field is not the religious freedom in higher education. But I would not participate in a religious freedom conference at any institution where this would be a policy."

In an e-mail exchange with BYU, Juergensmeyer wondered aloud about what would happen if the tables were turned:

"There may be legal acceptance of such discrimination, but it is discrimination all the same, and I suspect that if a university in a Muslim country were to expel a student who wanted to become a Mormon, BYU administrators would regard this as a violation of religious freedom. And they would be right."