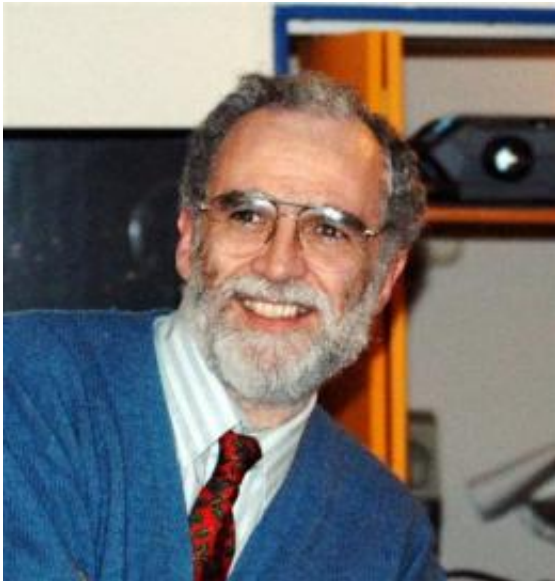


Scientist alleges religious discrimination in Ky.

December 17 2010, By DYLAN LOVAN , Associated Press



This Dec. 26, 2005 photo provided by Mark Dahmke, shows astronomer Martin Gaskell. Dahmke argues that his faith and questions about evolution kept him from getting a prime job as director of a brand new student observatory at the University of Kentucky. He has filed a lawsuit against the university in federal court in Lexington. (AP Photo/Mark Dahmke)

(AP) -- An astronomer argues that his Christian faith and his peers' belief that he is an evolution skeptic kept him from getting a prestigious job as the director of a new student observatory at the University of Kentucky.

Martin Gaskell quickly rose to the top of a list of applicants being considered by the university's search committee. One member said he was "breathtakingly above the other applicants."

Others openly worried his Christian faith could conflict with his duties as a scientist, calling him "something close to a creationist" and "potentially evangelical."

Even though Gaskell says he is not a creationist, he claims he was passed over for the job at UK's MacAdam Student [Observatory](#) three years ago because of his religion and statements that were perceived to be critical of the [theory of evolution](#).

Gaskell has sued the university, claiming lost income and [emotional distress](#). Last month a judge rejected a motion from the university and allowed it to go to trial Feb. 8.

"There is no dispute that based on his application, Gaskell was a leading candidate for the position," U.S. [District Judge](#) Karl S. Forester wrote in the ruling.

Gaskell later learned that professors had discussed his purported religious views during the search process. Gaskell told the AP in an e-mail that he didn't grow frustrated, but felt "one should not allow universities to get away with religious discrimination."

University scientists wondered to each other in internal e-mails if Gaskell's faith would interfere with the job, which included public outreach, according to court records.

The topic became so heated behind the scenes that even university biologists, who believed Gaskell was a critic of evolution, weighed in by citing a controversial Bible-based museum in Kentucky that had just

opened.

"We might as well have the Creation Museum set up an outreach office in biology," biology professor James Krupa wrote to a colleague in an October 2007 e-mail. The museum was making national headlines at the time for exhibits that assert the literal truth of the Bible's creation story.

Science professors cited a lecture Gaskell has given called "Modern Astronomy, the Bible and Creation," which he developed for "Christians and others interested in Bible and science questions...", according to an outline of the lecture. Gaskell told the AP he was invited to give the lecture at UK in 1997, and organizers had read his notes.

The wide-ranging lecture outlines historical scientific figures who discuss God and interpretations of the creation story in the biblical chapter Genesis. Also in the notes, Gaskell mentions evolution, saying the theory has "significant scientific problems" and includes "unwarranted atheistic assumptions and extrapolations," according to court records.

Gaskell was briefly asked about the lecture during his job interview in 2007 with the chair of the Department of Physics and Astronomy, Michael Cavagnero, according to Gaskell's deposition. Gaskell said he felt that questions related to religion during the job interview were "inappropriate."

"I think that if I had a document like this and I was advocating atheism ... I don't think it would be an issue," he said of his lecture.

Science professors also expressed concern that hiring Gaskell would damage the university's image.

An astrophysics professor, Moshe Elitzur, told Cavagnero that the hire

would be a "huge public relations mistake," according to an e-mail from Cavagnero in court records.

"Moshe predicts that he would not be here one month before the (Lexington) Herald-Leader headline would read: 'UK hires creationist to direct new student observatory.'"

University spokesman Jay Blanton declined to comment Monday because the litigation is pending.

Gaskell said he is not a "creationist" and his views on evolution are in line with other biological scientists. In his lecture notes, Gaskell also distances himself from Christians who believe the earth is a few thousand years old, saying their assertions are based on "mostly very poor science."

Gaskell's lawsuit is indicative of an increasingly tense debate between religion and science on college campuses and elsewhere, said Steven K. Green, a law professor and director of the Center for Religion, Law & Democracy at Willamette University in Salem, Ore.

"I think it reflects a phenomenon that the sides in this debate are becoming more encamped, they're hunkering down," Green said.

"Because certainly within the biology community and within the science community generally, they see the increasing attacks creationists are making as very threatening to their existence - and vice versa, to a certain extent."

Gaskell was uniquely qualified for the new position at the University of Kentucky, according to court records, because he oversaw the design and construction of an observatory at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. He also advised UK during the building of the MacAdam facility. He currently teaches at the University of Texas.

His attorney, Frank Manion, said scientists at UK were too quick to place Gaskell on one side of the creation-evolution debate.

"Unfortunately too many people get hung up on the idea that you have to be one extreme or the other," said Manion, who works for American Center for Law & Justice, which focuses on religious freedom cases. They say "you can't be a religious believer and somebody who accepts evolution, which is clearly not true. And Gaskell's a perfect example of that."

More information: UK MacAdam Student Observatory:
<http://bit.ly/gKvvkB>

©2010 The Associated Press. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed.

Citation: Scientist alleges religious discrimination in Ky. (2010, December 17) retrieved 24 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2010-12-scientist-alleges-religious-discrimination-ky.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--