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NEWS

Finke explores religious freedom in Birkett Williams Lecture



By Taylor Tomlinson

March 25, 2014

For more information, contact OBU's news bureau at newsbureau@obu.edu or (870) 245-5208.

ARKADELPHIA, Ark. -- Emphasizing that "almost every country has some sort of assurance of religious freedoms," Dr. Roger Finke recently delivered Ouachita Baptist University's spring 2014 Birkett Williams Lecture.

Finke, professor of sociology and religious studies at Penn State University, presented "Origins and Consequences of Religious Restrictions: A Global Overview" as part of the university's endowed Birkett Williams Lecture Series.

Amid varying levels of religious freedom around the globe, Finke noted, "It's very easy to think of Muslim nations as not having any religious freedoms, and everyone else being okay." He cautioned, however, that such assumptions are not accurate.

Finke explained that his studies found at least three myths associated with religious freedoms. "First, that with the exception of Muslim nations, religious freedoms are largely protected; second, that with the exception of Muslim nations, religious persecution rarely occurs; and third, that the activities of religious groups, especially minority groups, must be restricted to prevent religiously motivated violence." Finke

cited extensive research to show that those myths fail to provide an accurate reflection of the complex world of religious freedom and restrictions.

Through his findings, Finke argued that “the change of religion and state relations is one of the real key factors to understanding religion.” He added that countries that provide religious freedoms are less likely to experience “religiously motivated violence.”

“Dr. Finke’s finding that an open, free religious marketplace makes it less likely that any one religion will grow strong enough to be viewed as a threat by a government is a very important one when discussing religious freedom with governments suspicious of religion,” said Dr. David Caddell, associate professor of sociology. “Dr. Finke has made a genuinely significant contribution in this area. We were fortunate to have him here at OBU.”

Since earning his doctorate in sociology from the University of Washington, Finke has become “one of the leading and most prolific scholars in the sociology of religion,” Caddell noted. Finke is the founding director of the Association of Religion Data Archives, the largest clearinghouse for religious data in the world.

According to the ARDA website, thearda.com, the association “strives to democratize access to the best data on religion. Founded as the American Religion Data Archive in 1997 and going online in 1998, the initial archive was targeted at researchers interested in American religion. The targeted audience and the data collection have both greatly expanded since 1998, now including American and international collections and developing features for educators, journalists, religious congregations and researchers.”

Finke also is the author several books, including *Places of Faith: A Road Trip across America’s Religious Landscape*, *The Price of Freedom Denied: Religious Persecution and Conflict in the 21st Century* and *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion*. He also has published articles, including “Cross-National Moral Beliefs: The Influence of National Religious Context” and “The Effects of Professional Training: The Social and Religious Capital Acquired in Seminaries.”

“Professor Finke brought to campus a fresh perspective on church-state issues,” said Dr. Randall Wight, dean of Ouachita’s W.H. Sutton School of Social Sciences, which hosted this semester’s Birkett Williams Lecture. “Seeing the power of the Association of Religion Data Archives website from its director’s hand was alone invaluable.”

“His ideas on religious freedom were applicable to students in a variety of disciplines—sociology, political science, history and religious studies,” Caddell added. “They also dovetailed nicely with several classes going on this semester—Contemporary World, Intro to Sociology, Advanced Statistics, Research Methods and some of our religious studies courses.”

Ouachita’s Birkett Williams Lecture Series was established in 1977 through a gift from the late Birkett L. Williams, a 1910 Ouachita graduate. His generous endowment established the lectures as an opportunity to extend the concepts of a liberal arts education beyond the classroom by bringing outstanding scholars and public figures to Ouachita’s campus.

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