

Academic Freedom: Introduction

Are professors free to teach without any restraints? Is academic freedom possible at a Christian college? Or is academic freedom a monopoly of secular institutions? Are we placing too many restrictions on our Christian academic institutions of higher learning? Does a teacher have the right to teach and write without any interference, even if his works contradict the basic purpose of his school? Is it right for a school to allow, and even to encourage such an approach to teaching? Are those, who refuse to support teaching, which is subversive to the confessional stance of the school, guilty of suppressing honestly held opinions? Are they enemies of liberty, bigots even? Are conservatives opposed to real education and free inquiry? Are they pushing a narrow indoctrination? Is "creedal interference" from the supporting constituency of Christian colleges jeopardizing accreditation, and in the process driving away some of the most competent faculty members? These questions are very much alive!

Dr. James T. Draper, a key Southern Baptist leader, wrote about the tensions some colleges in his denomination have experienced. In some, he says, when students reflect the beliefs of the churches that nurtured them, they are ridiculed for those beliefs. And he comments, "This is not to be tolerated." He also observes that the sanctity of academic freedom is being used against conservative Christianity today. And he raises the interesting question, "Why is academic freedom only for non-conservatives? Why is it that genuine evangelicals who believe in the total inerrancy of Scripture are not given token consideration for faculty openings in many of our Southern Baptist seminaries and colleges?" And he also wonders why liberal seminaries won't offer courses on evangelical theology, such as "The Theology of Charles Hodge," or "The Theology of B.B. Warfield." In conservative seminaries the theology of liberal or neo-orthodox theologians are studied, besides the conservative scholars. In liberal institutions there appears to be far more "narrow indoctrination" than in the conservative ones.

Never before have so many defended the principles of academic freedom, yet we see so little of it. We live in a society whose structures are more rigid and whose options are more restricted than ever. Secularists cry out how Christians and others holding traditional views want "to impose their beliefs." We must be "open minded" and don't "push your beliefs" on others. How ironic! Who pushes their views down the throats of people? The secular media! How much freedom is there to teach as an evangelical at a secular university? Can he/she teach from his/her own biblically formed perspective? No! Dr. Rousas John Rushdoony notes, "Atheistic colleges do not allow orthodox Christianity to be taught by their professors, but they call it a violation of academic freedom if a professor in a Christian college is not allowed to teach atheism. Call this by its right name; it is not a doctrine of freedom but of subversion and totalitarianism ... The champions of this so-called academic freedom are not interested in freedom; they are for slavery, because they themselves are slaves, and their doctrine is one of academic enslavement. Beware of men who defend it."

What Is Academic Freedom?

What is academic freedom? A definition depends on one's presuppositions. In North America it refers almost invariably to the right of each member of the faculty of an institution to enjoy the freedom to study, to inquire, to speak his mind, to communicate his ideas, and to assert truth as he sees it. This concept of academic freedom is in accordance with North American individualism. The claim to academic freedom is generally stated and tested in favor of the individual teacher. Once this presupposition is accepted, we can readily see that from this point of view academic freedom means the right to teach and write without interference, even if the instructor's work goes directly against the basic purpose of the institution. Those who refuse to support teaching which is subversive to their faith are considered guilty of suppressive opinion and opposed to freedom of speech.

In 1967, a Joint Statement on Rights and Freedoms of Students, which has become authoritative, points out that "freedom to teach and freedom to learn are inseparable facets of academic freedom." It is noted that since "free inquiry and free expression are indispensable to the attainment" of the goals of academic institutions which are: "The transmission of knowledge, the pursuit of truth, the development of students, and the general well-being of society" "students should be encouraged to develop the capacity for critical judgment and to engage in a sustained and independent search for truth." A basic presupposition is that final truth in all branches of human knowledge has not yet been achieved. New truths must be discovered. And they will emerge only as ideas clash with ideas in the unrestricted marketplace of ideas. In the same year, Justice Brennan speaking for the U.S. Supreme Court, observed:

Our nation is deeply committed to safeguarding academic freedom, which is of transcendent value to all of us and not merely to the teachers concerned. That freedom is therefore a special concern of the First Amendment, which does not tolerate laws that cast a pall of orthodoxy over the classroom. "The vigilant protection of constitutional freedom is nowhere more vital than in the community of American schools." The classroom is peculiarly the "market place of ideas." The Nation's future depends upon leaders trained through wide exposure to that robust exchange of ideas which discovers truth "out of a multitude of tongues, (rather) than through any kind of authoritative selection."

By the late 1960s this concept had been accepted by the U.S. Supreme Court and the academic community as an essential element of intellectual freedom.

What does this mean for the classroom, and the lecture hall, and the professor's publishing ambitions? A professor has all the rights of citizenship, including the freedom of speech and association. And in exercising those rights he should be subject to no institutional interference. On the surface, this description looks quite appealing, fair, and progressive. But when you scrutinize it, this view of academic freedom is anti-Christian and oppressive. Man's reason and individualism are enthroned, and revelation is dethroned. At the heart of this modern view of academic freedom is no longer a Christian value system, which believes in God and accepts as a given the moral order in which man has to live, work and explore. Man's reason has become the highest source

of wisdom and value. And the working principle is no longer "Freedom of religion" but "Freedom from religion." Lest anyone think that I am exaggerating my point, I will quote the *Columbia Encyclopedia's* definition of academic freedom:

Academic freedom: the right of scholars to pursue their research, to teach, and to publish without control or restraint from the institutions which employ them. This is a civil right that is enjoyed, at least in statute, by the citizens of democratic countries, in the case of scholars whose occupation includes the property right of tenure of office. An essential to the acceptance of the concept is the notion that truth is best discovered through the open investigation of all data . . . Historically, academic freedom developed in the period of the Enlightenment.

This definition shows that the modern concept of academic freedom is a product of the Enlightenment and Rationalism. No restraints!

The Enlightenment

The Enlightenment is a framework of thought which strongly influenced eighteenth century intellectuals. J.I. Packer and Thomas Howard call it a "movement of secular intellectualism." Not without pride, the age called itself "the century of the philosophers." The Enlightenment extolled the omnipotence of modern science over nature. All progress of humanity was expected from the rationalistic exploration of science. Every aspect of human society was viewed in terms of "the natural scientific method." The Enlightenment had unbridled optimism in man. This period was marked by a deep trust in reason on the one hand, and a deep distrust in all historic authority on the other. In 1784 the philosopher Kant described the Enlightenment period as a question of the maturing process of mankind. Man had now become of age. No longer is anything passively accepted on the basis of historic authority – such as the Bible. Something is accepted as true only through independent thought. Salvation of mankind lies in gaining and the expansion of knowledge. Man's reason is supreme. It is placed over history and revelation. This detour into the age of Enlightenment may have been difficult, yet it was necessary for the understanding of our modern age. No idea is without roots. In our age, we don't use the description Enlightenment, but humanism.

Humanism

Like the Enlightenment, secular humanism enthrones man. H.J. Blackham comments, "Humanism proceeds from the assumption that man is on his own and this life is all and an assumption of responsibility for one's own life and for the life of mankind. The simple theme of humanism is self-determination, for persons, for groups and societies, for mankind together." Man is now the center of the universe. Religion is seen as a hindrance rather than a help. Humanists are sure of man's innate goodness and wisdom. They share a common faith in evolutionism, which J.I. Packer and Thomas Howard describe as "the common humanist hypothesis." Humanists believe that science will make man truly free. The dark ages of superstition and the dogmatic prejudice of church doctrine will be left behind. True freedom is found in autonomous,

lucid and analytic thought. The supremacy of man! An instructor, therefore, is free to teach and to write in pursuit of truth.

If the modern idea of academic freedom as defined by the Columbia Encyclopedia would be accepted as valid and true, the result would be anarchy. If this would be the only working definition, it would prevent us from establishing Christian colleges. As Dr. Rousas John Rushdoony observes:

'It would mean that in every church every kind of religious idea would have equal rights. This would make it impossible to maintain the integrity of any church. The same is true of colleges and universities. Let us assume that we, as a group of persons with a particular school of economics, a type of philosophy, and a very definite concept of education, established a college. The modern doctrine of academic freedom would deny us the right to have our kind of school; it would insist that we could have no standard of faith and character which we could require of all faculty members. The modern doctrine of academic freedom would rob us of the right of controlling our own school, because it would demand the total independence of all faculty members to be "without control or restraint." We would be obliged to support the school without any right of control, or else we would be called intolerant, fascistic, and many like names for withdrawing our support."

What is true academic freedom? The right to establish institutions of learning true to their confessions, whether they be Christian, humanist, Muslim or whatever?

Christian Freedom

Johan D. Tangelder
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