Academic Freedom at Christian Institutions

By

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I. The Problem

The venerable Jorge, the blind former librarian in Umberto Eco’s The Name of the Rose, sets the problem for us masterfully. Jorge has, throughout the novel, taken murderous steps to make certain that the second book of Aristotle’s Poetics, the book dealing with laughter, remains hidden within the walls of the octagonal fortress-like library. Finally, at the very end, super-sleuth William of Baskerville confronts Jorge and demands to know his motivation:

“But now tell me,” William was saying, “why? Why did you want to shield this book more than so many others? Why did you hide—though not at the price of crime—treatises on necromancy, pages that may have blasphemed against the name of God, while for these pages you damned your brothers and may have damned yourself? There are many other books that speak of comedy, many others that praise laughter. Why did this one fill you with such fear?”

“But because it was by the Philosopher. Every book by that man has destroyed a part of the learning that Christianity had accumulated over the centuries. The fathers had said everything that needed to be known about the power of the Word, but then Boethius had only to gloss the Philosopher and the divine mystery of the Word was transformed into a human parody of categories and syllogism. The book of Genesis says what has to be known about the composition of the cosmos, but it sufficed to rediscover the Physics of the Philosopher to have the universe reconceived in terms of dull and slimy matter.... Every word of the Philosopher, by whom now even saints and prophets swear, has overturned the image of the world. But he had not succeeded in overturning the image of God. If this book were to become... had become an object for open interpretation, we would have crossed the last boundary.”

William continues to dispute with Jorge, challenging him to explain why laughter is so dangerous to the Church. For each question, Jorge has an answer, a not-totally-implausible answer. But at the end, Eco puts his judgment into William’s mouth. “You,” he says to Jorge, “You are the Devil.”

Such would be the evaluation of most modern proponents of academic freedom if they were to catch Jorge in the Library—or anywhere else. He appears to represent the very worst possible threat to the modern academic enterprise, a worst which many see as all-too-present even in modern America.

II. Some Responses

The case of Father Curran at Catholic University has sparked intense debate in recent years and, in the opinions of many who have been following that case and the responses of various accrediting agencies to that case, the discussion is just beginning, especially in light of the fact that a Washington D.C. court, on February 28, 1989, acted to uphold the right of Catholic University to dismiss Father Curran as it did. Debate over the propriety of changes being imposed by more conservative Trustees at a variety of Southern Baptist schools and the announcement by the AAUP in the May-June, 1989, issue of Academe of a censure of Concordia Seminary (Indiana) for violations of academic freedom assure that the matter will continue to be a critical one in American Christian higher education.
The modern academic establishment has been sufficiently unnerved by Jorge’s specter, which they see in earlier antecedents of such events as the Curran case, the fundamentalist takeover of the Southern Baptist Convention and the problems at Concordia, to build some rather rigorous defenses of what has come to be called academic freedom. Here are several of those defenses. The Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools says this:

Academic freedom and job security are not synonymous and should not be contingent on each other. Regardless of whether faculty members hold probationary, initial, or part-time appointments, or are on extended contract or permanent tenure, the same principles of academic freedom must apply to all. Academic freedom has to do with a method of inquiry rather than with the personal views of the inquirer. It gives one the right and implies the obligation as a scholar to examine all data and to question every assumption. It debars one from preconceived conclusions.\(^4\)

The American Association of University Professors adopted a basic statement on academic freedom in 1940 and provided some modifications to that statement in 1969. Here are both:

1940 statement:

Institutions of higher education are conducted for the common good and not to further the interest of either the individual teacher or the institution as a whole. The common good depends upon the free search for truth and its free exposition. Academic freedom is essential to these purposes and applies to both teaching and research. Freedom in research is fundamental to the advancement of truth. Academic freedom in its teaching aspect is fundamental for the protection of the rights of the teacher in teaching and of the student to freedom in learning. The teacher is entitled to freedom in the classroom in discussing his subject, but he should be careful not to introduce into his teaching controversial matter which has no relation to his subject.

1969 modification:

The intent of this statement is not to discourage what is “controversial.” Controversy is at the heart of the free academic inquiry which the entire statement is designed to foster. The passage serves to underscore the need for the teacher to avoid persistently intruding material which has no relation to his subject.

1940 statement:

Limitations of academic freedom because of religious or other aims of the institution should be clearly stated in writing at the time of the appointment.

1969 modification:

Most church-related institutions no longer need or desire the departure from the principle of academic freedom implied in the 1940 Statement, and we do not now endorse such a departure.\(^5\)

The Association of Theological Schools endorsed the AAUP statement in 1970 and adopted its own, more lengthy statement in 1976:

Central to the vocation of the theological school and to its faculty members and students is the inquiry for truth. This inquiry is both a communal and an individual vocation. In pursuit of the inquiry for truth, a theological school which has a confessional or doctrinal standard may expect that its faculty subscribe to that standard; and the requirement for such subscription should be mutually understood at the time of their affiliation with the institution. The question
of a faculty member’s adherence to the standard may be opened according to specified procedures.

Any challenge to the confessional or doctrinal regularity of a faculty member should be subject to open hearing before the faculty member's colleagues and before the governing board of the school after consultation with students.

When controversy arises within a religious body concerning the understanding of its confessional or doctrinal standards, the governing body of the school which subscribes to such standards should provide its faculty members with all appropriate procedural safeguards for the protection of their academic freedom.

Faculty members should be free to teach, carry on research, and publish, subject to adequate performance of their academic duties as agreed upon with the school.

Teachers should have freedom in the classroom to discuss the subjects in which they have competence and may claim to be specialists without harassment or limitations.  

Some might be inclined, upon reading the above material, simply to argue that “this is the secular (or, in the case of the ATS statement, the ‘liberal theological’) culture around us” and to conclude that such statements have no direct relevance to the conservative Christian community.  Such would be a short-sighted and dangerous argument.

First of all, most of the schools which serve the conservative Christian community (like Westminster Reformed, and Covenant Theological Seminaries, and like Geneva, Covenant, Wheaton, and Westmont Colleges) are accountable to agencies like ATS and Middle States.  Secondly, and much more important, within our Christian communities, the same issues are present.  Two weeks prior to starting work on this article, a faculty member at the school where I was working the time shared some written material with me in which he expressed some positive reactions to the general school of thought called “the New Perspective on Paul.”  He knew that our school had received sharp criticism on this subject already and he suspected that the posting of his material on the Internet would provoke more such criticism.  To what degree may an institution like ours tolerate or even encourage exploration of topics which some in our constituency would regard as “theologically dangerous?”  How should creedal institutions handle “dangerous” subjects like the use of women’s gifts in the church?  How can we protect the orthodox commitments of the institution while fully supporting academic exploration which produces theological “discoveries?”

III. Problems with Responses

What can we say about these defenses against Jorge’s intrusions? They are obviously carefully-reasoned, sensitive, and broad. They do have a lot going for them. But they share a flaw which may be fatal, particularly for those of us who believe that there are at least some preconceived conclusions from which we do not want our faculty members debarred. To put it simply, these statements, to a greater or lesser degree, seem to make freedom a telos, an end.

To be sure, other “ends” are mentioned. But these are usually so broadly conceived (“the common good”) and vague (“truth”) as to be, in practical terms, meaningless. And when institutions try, in their own ways, to specify the good and the true for their institutions, they are often cited for violating academic freedom. In explaining their decision to censure Concordia Seminary for violating academic freedom, the authors of the recent AAUP report make this telling statement: “While the investigating committee acknowledges the right of Concordia Theological Seminary to set limitations as it has on what its faculty can write and say, the committee believes that in so doing the seminary separates itself from the community of higher education that holds academic freedom central to institutional integrity.” Without getting into the
details of the Concordia situation, it is clear that, at least in this application of AAUP policy, any limitation on faculty speaking or writing is wrong because such limitation reduces academic freedom.

Although, therefore, the AAUP generally acknowledges other ends, in practice academic freedom has become a functioning telos. Such attempts to restrain Jorge are, for Christians, dangerous because they fail to make it clear (in practice as well as in theory) that there is some other more fundamental goal of the educational process than the freedom of the teacher and student. Echoes of the sub-Christian tones of the Enlightenment resound as loudly through these statements as echoes of Jorge resound through the Vatican’s silencing of Father Curran.

There is, in other words, a failure in all of these statements, even that of ATS (which is the most sensitive to “ultimate concerns”), to make it clear that freedom is a means to an end, that our entire educational process must be seen in relation to One who transcends the “rights” of teachers and students as much as the heavens transcend the earth. While it is clearly understandable that secular agencies like the AAUP and Middle States might not want to acknowledge Him in their official documents, Christian individuals and institutions must not fail to assert the necessity of their acknowledging the Lord God as the starting point of all of our discussions of this matter.

There are many Christians who have probed the dangers of such notions of freedom as those embodied in the statements quoted above, but none has done so more powerfully than the Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoyevsky. In The Possessed, Dostoyevsky provides a scathing and basically sound critique of freedom as telos. Listening to this Christian voice from another culture may help to clarify some of the issues for twentieth century American Christians.

Kirilov is the character whom Dostoyevsky creates to represent this Enlightenment ideal of freedom. In the context of a wild maelstrom of political theorizing and intrigue, Kirby announces that he has discovered a secret—God no longer exists, and this means that man is now free to become God himself. (Parenthetically, it is fascinating that Dostoyevsky always, here in The Possessed, in his earlier work Crime and Punishment, and in his last and greatest novel The Brothers Karamazov, sees a link between assertions of human freedom and atheism.) But how is Kirby to demonstrate his freedom, his godhood?

This is the crucial point: if indeed freedom is the ultimate goal, the most convincing evidence of having arrived is suicide. Suicide for no reason—that is the ultimate demonstration of freedom. But let Kirby make his own case—he is trying to convince Pyotr Stepanovich Verhovensky, himself a nihilist, of the reasonableness of his intention to kill himself, but Pyotr doesn’t seem to understand. Kirby speaks first:

“Hold your tongue; you won’t understand anything. If there is no God, then I am God.”

“There, I could never understand that point of yours: why are you God?”

“If God exists, all is His will and from His will I cannot escape. If not, it’s all my will and I am bound to show self-will.”

“Self-will? But why are you bound?”

“Because all will has become mine. Can it be that no one in the whole planet, after making an end of God and believing in his own will, will dare to express his self-will on the most vital point? It’s like a beggar inheriting a fortune and being afraid of it and not daring to approach the bag of gold, thinking himself too weak to own it. I want to manifest my self-will. I may be the only one but I’ll do it.”

“Do it by all means.”
“I am bound to shoot myself because the highest point of my self-will is to kill myself with my own hands... Do you understand now that the salvation for all consists in proving this idea to every one? Who will prove it? If I can’t understand how an atheist could know that there is no God and not kill himself on the spot... For three years I have been seeking for the attribute of my godhead and I’ve found it; the attribute of my godhead is self-will! That’s all I can do to prove in the highest point my independence and my new terrible freedom. For it is very terrible. I am killing myself to prove my independence and my new terrible freedom.”

And Kirby is a man of his theory: shortly after this discussion, he does indeed take a pistol and, for no reason, he shoots himself to death.

The brilliance of Dostoyevsky’s characterization lies in Kirilov’s simultaneous rationality and absurdity. The point is that Kirby is right: if freedom is ultimate, then suicide is logical. But the point is also that Kirilov is horribly wrong: because, in fact, freedom is not ultimate, because, in fact, God does exist, suicide is a disaster. Dostoyevsky embodies his response to Kirby in several characters, most perfectly in Alyosha in The Brothers Karamazov; but perhaps the brief words of Shatov, another political theorist in The Possessed, summarizes it most crisply:

“Starting from unlimited freedom, I arrive at unlimited despotism. I will add, however, that there can be no solution. . . . but mine.”

Those who make being free their telos are on the road to despotism or to suicide or perhaps to both—a severe and certainly controversial judgment, but Dostoyevsky is correct. If freedom becomes telos, it will soon be despot, and this is a potential danger of the statements on academic freedom posed by Middle States, AAUP, and ATS.10 But how might Christians who participate in institutions which are committed to the ultimacy of the Lord God avoid a Kiribovian fate without becoming twentieth century Protestant Jorge? It is to this question that I would like to suggest some possible answers.

IV. Some Suggestions

First, we must avoid creating our institutional policy regarding academic freedom from a negative perspective. That is, we do not emphasize what our faculty members are to be free from. For example, we do not begin by saying that they are to be free from preconceived conclusions. The starting point of institutional policy must be what the institution wants to accomplish—stated as specifically as possible. This way of proceeding will make it clear that freedom—however it is later defined—is a means to an end. Faculty members must be free to contribute to the accomplishment of institutional goals. The institution itself must be free to achieve what it sets as its goals. Beginning with this understanding will help institutions and individuals to avoid the Kiribovian mindset.

Second, freedom, specifically academic freedom in a Christian context, must be carefully defined. Biblical passages dealing with freedom are numerous and complex and multi-faceted. Over and over again, however, one theme emerges—Christian freedom is not license, it is not telos, it is a means to the end of service. Paul states it most starkly in Romans 6:22 when he defines Christian freedom in terms of slavery to Christ. Christian freedom is opportunity to worship the Saviour and to contribute to the growth of His kingdom.
This approach to the biblical data regarding freedom has been best developed by Jonathan Edwards, whom Perry Miller has called “the greatest philosopher-theologian yet to grace the American scene.” Debate has raged and will continue to rage over Edwards’s assertions, but, because of his Christian stature and influence, evangelical Christians simply must deal with his arguments in this difficult process of developing a biblical definition of freedom. In *Freedom of the Will*, Edwards argues that no human action is uncaused and that, therefore, it is perfectly consistent to discuss freedom in the context of causation. The immediate cause of every human choice is the “disposition” of the individual under consideration, and every choice emerges from the dominant disposition in that particular individual. In other words, each of us always does what he most wants to do. Freedom consists in the ability (Edwards calls it the natural ability) to do what the individual most wants to do. Lack of freedom consists in some kind of external restraint that keeps the individual from acting on his strongest motivation.

If freedom is what Edwards says it is, then every person, Christian and atheist, normally acts on his strongest motivations which emerge from the fundamental disposition of his heart. Further, it is in no way a compromise of academic freedom, properly understood, for an institution to seek to make sure that its faculty members’ strongest motivations coincide with the stated goals of the institution. As a matter of fact, most institutions do this unconsciously—if the institution’s goals are very broad, then the institution tends to have a faculty the collective motivations of whose members are very broad as well. But an institution which has narrower goals is not providing any less freedom if it seeks a faculty in which the strongest motivations mesh with the specific goals of the institution.

Freedom in this context would mean the ability of the faculty members to act according to their strongest motivations. To give but one example, academic freedom in an Edwardsian context would mean that the institution itself must seek to provide the kind of pedagogical environment within which faculty members can work, shielded from continual harassment by internal or external constituencies, toward the accomplishment of institutional goals (which the original faculty selection process has determined are consistent with individual motivations). The point of all this is to indicate that we must be sure that we are working with a biblical definition of freedom such as that offered by Edwards.

The above suggestions lead naturally to a practical “case study” application. Since clear statement of institutional goals is the most important step toward providing appropriate academic freedom, we start there. Suppose a group of faculty members at a given academic institution becomes convinced that the institution of which they are a part has ceased to be a positive force in the Kingdom of Christ and has become a negative force in the Kingdom. They believe, specifically, that the original school has renounced the authority of Scripture by denying the historicity of the miracles of Christ. These faculty members thus desire to leave the first institution and to start another which would appropriately uphold biblical authority.

As they structure their new institution, these individuals must clearly define why they exist, whom they seek to serve, what sort of “product” they intend to produce. With the specific background mentioned above, it might thus be stated that the new institution exists to train individuals for the pastoral ministry from a theological perspective which includes commitment to the inerrancy of Scripture. In the creation of its various institutional documents, including the Faculty Manual within which are discussed faculty benefits and responsibilities, the goals of the institution are consistently utilized in structuring all of the statements. In the cultivation of financial support and in the recruitment of a student body for the new institution, these same goals are enunciated regularly and clearly.

Twenty years pass, and rumors begin to circulate that one faculty member at the new institution is utilizing redaction criticism in a manner which appears to some to deny biblical inerrancy. None of what has been said above makes the problem resulting from these rumors simple or easy to handle. But the above does suggest an approach to the problem which may reduce the number of extraneous issues raised and which may, indeed, simplify the process somewhat. Most important, in light of the definitions offered, this approach will be more consistently biblical.
To be specific, it will make a world of difference to the process whether the following statement, already quoted above, is or is not regarded as operative at the institution:

[Academic freedom]... gives one the right and implies the obligation as a scholar to examine all data and to question every assumption. It debars one from preconceived conclusions.  

Given the stated goals of the institution under consideration, it would be entirely inappropriate for anyone to argue that faculty members at this institution have the right to question the ‘assumption’ of the authority of Scripture. And, given the definition of freedom offered above, it would be entirely inappropriate for anyone to argue that those faculty members at this institution who maintain preconceived conclusions about the authority of Scripture are somehow unable to be or to do all that they should.

But the problem is still there and must be handled. In dealing with the teachings of the particular faculty member, those who believe that he is a negative influence at the institution must show exactly that. They must show that this particular faculty member is hindering the institution’s ability to accomplish its stated and published goals. More specifically, they must show that his use of redaction criticism is undermining the institution’s attempts to train individuals for the pastoral ministry from the perspective of biblical inerrancy. A vague sense that part of the constituency views this faculty member as a “liberal,” suspicions about the validity of redaction criticism as a hermeneutical tool, evidence that others who have used the method have later become “liberal,” a belief that the faculty member is on a “trajectory” which will ultimately and necessarily lead to heresy – none of these is adequate grounds on which to call for the faculty member’s dismissal.

In this context, the faculty member is “free” to contribute to the institution’s goals, and it is only when he is demonstrably undermining those goals that his faculty status should be challenged. Until it can be shown that he is compromising institutional goals, the faculty member deserves the vigorous and aggressive support of the institution. To use Edwardsean terminology, the institution should seek to minimize any external restraint on the faculty member’s ability and opportunity to act on his commitment to advance the purposes of the school. If harassment by segments of the institution’s constituency threatens to become such restraint, it is the institution’s responsibility to respond decisively in whatever manner the particular situation demands.

On the other hand, it is always appropriate to ask any member of the institution to show how he sees his actions contributing to the accomplishment of agreed-upon goals. In the hypothetical situation about which we have been speaking, no element of academic freedom scripturally defined is violated by a request to the faculty member that he produce a brief position paper demonstrating how his use of redaction criticism contributes to the goal of training pastors from the perspective of biblical inerrancy. Indeed, the faculty member should have such a position paper already worked out in his mind before the request comes and should rejoice at the opportunity to share his ideas with other members of his community.

In fact, whether or not they are specifically requested, such papers should be a regular ingredient of institutional life as all members of the community stir up one another to the “good work” of the corporate accomplishment of communal goals.

Indeed, this is the ideal way for healthy give-and-take between individual faculty members and the institution to occur. It is in such position papers, originally shared with other individual faculty members or with the entire faculty as a group, that intellectual frontiers are appropriately probed and theological boundaries properly stretched. Here is where and how a faculty member may argue for a re-examination of institutional assumptions without undermining institutional commitments. If, for example, a faculty member comes to believe that biblical inerrancy is an untenable doctrine, he should raise questions, but he should do so first in this kind of “inter nos” situation and he should refrain from sharing such questions in the classroom or outside the institution until and unless he persuades those who make official institutional decisions to redefine the institutional goals. So, while there does need to be some place for these kinds of issues to be
raised, it still is the case that institutional freedom (the freedom to achieve clearly-stated institutional goals) takes precedence over individual freedom.  

On the assumption that the above “ideal” scenario has not produced institutional unity and harmony and that questions about the faculty member’s teaching of redaction criticism have made necessary a formal position paper on the subject, the school at this point has two options. It may judge the paper unsuccessful; that is, it may be decided that the faculty member has not shown how his use of redaction criticism does in fact move toward the accomplishment of institutional goals. In this case, further study or disciplinary action or both might be appropriate. None of these actions would, in the context described, violate biblical rights or freedoms. Any of these actions would, in fact, assert biblical rights and freedoms.

On the other hand, the school may judge the paper successful; that is, it may be decided that the faculty member has shown how his use of redaction criticism moves toward the accomplishment of institutional goals. In this case, publication or distribution to the constituency of a version of the paper and public, enthusiastic support of the work of the faculty member by the institution (so that he is shielded from further harassment on the matter) would be appropriate assertions of biblical rights and freedoms.

Surely difficulties will remain. Faculties will divide over the definition of inerrancy, constituencies will reject even those explanations of redaction criticism adopted unanimously by institutional Boards of Trustees, individual faculty members will want to change original commitments to biblical authority. There is no computer program which can run a “doctrine-check” on all that faculty members say and do. But defining terms (such as “freedom”) properly and asking the right questions (what is the institution’s “telos”) will help to keep the difficulties from looming larger than necessary. And an open willingness of faculty members to share their new insights and propositions first within the community of which they are a part and then genuinely to be subject to their brothers and sisters in the Lord will facilitate the entire process considerably.

Christian institutions must certainly avoid the murderous excesses of Jorge in The Name of the Rose but they must also reject the despotic but seductive freedom of such children of the Enlightenment as Kirilov in The Possessed. The One who is the Truth certainly did not seek to debar His individual or institutional followers from a preconceived commitment to Him, and it is no honorific Christian accomplishment to question the assumption of His Lordship. To be sure, in the context of Christian higher education, there will be those who claim that any attempt to set doctrinal parameters for our institutions aligns us with Jorge (such is the effect of the statement, quoted above, from the AAUP report on Concordia Theological Seminary). But such simply is not the case. We cannot allow the distortions of some to frighten us from a task to which God has called us. Kirilov simply is not the only alternative to Jorge.

We avoid both extremes by creating precise institutional goals statements which are: 1) drawn from scriptural teaching about our Lord’s own kingdom goals, 2) applied consistently to all aspects of institutional life, and 3) communicated clearly to all elements of institutional constituency. We affirm appropriate balance when we: 1) hire only individuals whose own personal commitments coincide with the stated goals of the institution, 2) insist that every member of the community contribute to the accomplishment of those goals, and 3) strive vigorously to remove any potential hindrances to those contributions. This, indeed, is the essence of academic freedom at Christian institutions.

2 Ibid., p. 477.
Among the responses the institution might make are the following: 1) publication in institutional and other publications of vigorous defenses of the faculty member; 2) provision of additional secretarial support to assist the faculty member in producing other forms of response; 3) reduction of the faculty member’s course load to facilitate such responses; 4) joining with the faculty member, where possible and appropriate, in filing ecclesiastical charges against those who have issued unfair or slanderous criticisms.

Parenthetically, it should be stated that such a request would be appropriate if directed to the institution's Development Officer with regard to a development project which he initiated or it directed to the institution's Recruitment Officer with regard to a recruiting strategy he planned. The institution has the right to expect any official member of community, including Trustees, always to act in a manner consistent with the goals of the institution. The focus in the present study is on the Faculty, but the principles apply throughout the institution.

This perspective is rooted in biblical teaching about the body of Christ (Ephesians 4, I Corinthians 12). As important as individual body parts are, the body as a whole takes precedence. Individualism and personal liberty are especially attractive to American Christians, but the older perspective of John Donne deserves careful attention in this context, “No man is an island...”