

Academic Freedom¹

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...Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.
–2 Cor. 3:17

In the age of “fake news,” the freedom to explore truth and reality is under threat everywhere. Of course, our age isn’t unique. Ever since the serpent beguiled Adam and Eve with lies about God, the Father of Lies has been sowing tares to pollute, obfuscate, confuse, distract, and set people at enmity. Freedom—hand in hand with critical evaluation of the truth—must be vigorously defended in our universities, seminaries, and churches. Scholars, clergy and faithful should be able to explore questions and express their conscience without fear of retribution.

I can compile quite a list of anecdotal evidence that academic freedom is being torpedoed in all parts of the Orthodox world. Scholars censored, side-lined or expelled for their research, writing, teaching, associations and conference attendance. Writers, clergy, and teachers who self-censor for fear of retribution from bishops, administration, trustees, donors who might question and criticize teaching and research and threaten to cut off financial support or employment. Faculty discouraged or explicitly forbidden from collaborating with “liberal” institutions, publications, or websites, or from pursuing topics deemed too controversial. Lay scholars reluctant to be ordained over anxiety about losing their academic freedom in the ecclesiastical establishment, knowing that clergy often are forbidden from expressing their views. OTSA members could surely compile their own portfolios of evidence.

Within Orthodox contexts it is those labeled “progressives” or “liberals” who have the most trouble exercising academic freedom. But Orthodox scholars—especially those who identify as conservative—who teach and do research in non-Orthodox institutions can also face serious constraints on their academic freedom from their superiors, colleagues and institutions. Here too there is plenty of anecdotal evidence that scholars who dare to express their Christian views could face reprisals, and could face serious limits on their research and promotion possibilities should they pursue areas of research not deemed politically correct.

In both cases it takes courage to stand one’s ground.

Jesus and Prophetic Freedom

One of the remarkable facts about the Bible’s place in the institutional life of Judaism and Christianity is that it enshrines the prophetic tradition as an entire category of bold communal criticism, renewal, and reform. The prophet can call the community to do better, to return to its vocation, or to leave its comfort zone and head into unfamiliar territory. This prophetic teaching, in both Old and New Testaments, is undomesticated, messy, and unpredictable, and our Lord Jesus Christ continued this raw prophetic tradition. Indeed, it was his relentless questioning of the received tradition that pushed religious leaders to call for his crucifixion.

¹ This is an abbreviated version of “Academic Freedom,” *The Wheel*, 21/22 (Spring/Summer 2020), 51-58.
https://www.academia.edu/44221532/Academic_Freedom

From the very beginning of his ministry one can find illustrations of Jesus' courage in speaking the truth freely. According to the Gospel of Luke, the hometown crowd in Nazareth at first "wondered at the gracious words which proceeded out of his mouth." But then it turned ugly and he called out their religious exclusivity.

And he said, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown. But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; ²⁶ yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. ²⁷ There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian. (Luke 4:24-26).

Jesus had hit a nerve, and "all in the synagogue were filled with wrath," driving him out of town to throw him off a cliff (Luke 4:30).

Jesus persisted in speaking his mind despite criticism, rebuke, and attempts to silence him. His enemies were constantly on watch to see if he would break the rules. And when he did, "they were filled with fury and discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus" (Luke 6:11). Jesus didn't ask permission to speak the truth, and thus demonstrated time after time that freedom is taken, not given.

No prophet, martyr, or saint was ever shut down for being too polite and obedient. As Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote, "We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed."² Similarly, academic freedom only becomes an issue when someone in authority doesn't like what you said or wrote or are researching. Or with whom you're collaborating. (But as Dr David Bradshaw pointed out at the 2020 conference of the Orthodox Theological Society in America—OTSA—it doesn't have to be authorities who object: it could be colleagues, students, church members or online commentators named and unnamed). And at that point you have to decide whether your integrity allows you to back down, or if it's an issue of consequence that requires you to stand your ground.

Jaroslav Pelikan on Academic Freedom

Throughout his book *The Idea of the University: A Reexamination*, Jaroslav Pelikan underlines that communal life is at the heart of the academy, and that this community cannot be sustained without freedom of inquiry and intellectual honesty. "What is needed is the skill and art of holding views strongly and yet of respecting views that are diametrically opposed."³

This ideal ought to apply equally in the Church, which was the model for the university as a learning community. "The university is, in God's good world, the principal community through which human rationality can examine all existing communities, families and structures—

² Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter From a Birmingham Jail," in *I Have a Dream: Letters and Speeches that Changed the World*, ed. James M. Washington (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1992), 90, 87.

³ Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Idea of the University: A Reexamination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 48, 55.

including itself, but also including the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church—and thus can help them to become what they are.”⁴

But in the polarized world that increasingly infects the church, finding such a forum for an exchange of ideas is becoming difficult. Even the term “dialogue” is now often dismissed as a covert attempt to convert. Thus “dialoguing” with those whose position you must vehemently deny can only pollute you and the hearers; hence, to allow their execrable views into the space between you is dangerous and irresponsible, especially if there are any “little ones” listening in.

Rod Dreher: Listening to those who disagree

Is there any way to get beyond this standoff and bring people of opposing views within the Orthodox Church together, in an atmosphere that gives oxygen to both freedom and truth? I’ve been surprisingly encouraged by an approach I heard from an unexpected voice: conservative columnist Rod Dreher, in a 2018 presentation at St Vladimir’s Seminary on “How To Listen to Those Who Disagree.” He made the point that American culture has become “emotivist,” i.e., “If I feel something is true, then it *is* true.” And this makes it difficult or even impossible to engage someone simply by using arguments based on logic. He admitted that over many years as a combative opinion journalist, he built his career on argument. But as he came to appreciate this deep emotivist current, he realized that he had to take a step back to better understand where others were coming from. One first needs to listen empathetically to understand *why* the other believes what they believe. This may not bring one side over to the ideas of the other, but it’s not designed to do that. It’s meant to facilitate the sharing of personal experiences that lead to hard-won convictions about these ideas.

Whether or not minds are changed, that kind of engagement with one other in an atmosphere of freedom and truth is vital for a healthy higher educational institution, especially in the Church. Metropolitan Kallistos Ware says that a college is a place for the cultivation of wonder and the pursuit of truth, both of which require freedom in order to flourish.

Wonder can be evoked but not compelled; and truth, as Christ observed, makes us free (John 8:32). In any university it is our task to bear witness to the value of freedom, and to resist all that erodes or diminishes our liberty. If I am asked by my students at Oxford, ‘What are you trying to teach us here?’ then perhaps my best answer is to say no more than this: ‘We want you to learn to be free.’⁵

“We want you to learn to be free.” That would be a striking addition to any Orthodox school’s values.

⁴ Pelikan, 67.

⁵ Kallistos Ware, “A Sense of Wonder,” in *The Inner Kingdom*, Yonkers, NY: SVS Press, 2000, 73.