

Assessing the Threat to Academic Freedom in the Catholic University

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Introduction

The question of academic freedom has long been a major concern for Catholic institutions of higher education. Traditionally, such concern has centered on the possibility that officials of the Church may intervene in the academic operation of universities and colleges, thus stifling the atmosphere of free inquiry that is an essential component of an effective university. However, in today's unique social and academic environment, it is important to view this threat in the context of the broad range of threats that stand poised to limit the freedoms of faculty in higher education. For while the potential for magisterial intervention is indeed real, one must consider the extent to which such intervention truly occurs, as well as the extent to which other, more powerful forces impede the exercise of freedom in academic settings. The intent of this paper is to therefore explore the Catholic church's policies and practices regarding academic freedom, and to compare the threat to freedom posed by the Church with that posed by other forces in today's academic culture.

The Catholic Church and Academic Freedom

It is apparent that the Catholic church is well aware of popular concerns over this issue, in light of its considerable effort to devise policies that balance faculty needs for academic freedom with its own desire to preserve the non-secular essence of the Catholic university. The most recent and broad-ranging attempt to achieve this balance is *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, Pope John Paul II's Apostolic Constitution on Catholic Universities (1990). The following excerpt reveals the attempt to mediate between academic freedom and the "common good" (p. 13):

Every Catholic university... is an academic community which... assists in the protection and advancement of human dignity and of a cultural heritage through research, teaching and various services offered to the local, national and international communities. It possesses that institutional autonomy necessary to perform its functions effectively and guarantees its members academic freedom, so long as the rights of the individual person and of the community are preserved within the confines of the truth and the common good.

An even stronger call for sensitivity to, and awareness of, the need for academic freedom was made in 1967's "Land O' Lakes Statement." This statement, composed by a variety of leaders of Catholic higher education, declared that: "To perform its teaching and research functions effectively the Catholic university must have a true autonomy and

academic freedom in the face of authority of whatever kind, lay or clerical, external to the academic community itself" (p. 7).

In addition to documents of this nature, a wide body of Catholic scholarship has dealt with the issue of balancing academic freedom with sensitivity and respect for a religious institutional mission. Typical of such scholarship is the work of Richard McBrien (1994), who argues that an effective religious university must temper doctrinal demands to promote optimal academic operation: "Since the Catholic university is an academic institution with the explicit intention of observing and being judged by the recognized canons of academic activity, everything it does and fosters must be rigorously scientific. In other words, the Catholic university cannot be so ecclesial in orientation that it compromises its academic integrity" (p. 157). A range of other prominent Catholic scholars echo these sentiments, calling on the need for openness, dialogue, and tolerance in our universities (Hesburgh 1994; McCormick 1994; and many others). These extensive elaborations on the need for academic freedom thus stand as a testament both to the Catholic church's, and the academic community's, high level of sensitivity to this issue.

All this is not to say, however, that a high level of sensitivity necessarily translates into a philosophy or policy of total freedom and openness. McInerney (1994) describes the limited character that academic freedom could assume under the guidelines of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* (p. 183):

...the pope refers again and again to academic freedom, but he usually adds "properly understood and respectful of the common good." If nothing else, this suggests that academics are free only up to a point, that their freedom to teach and/or advocate has its limits and can indeed be trumped by other considerations. To this it might be objected—in fact, the objection is frequently made—that a constrained freedom is no freedom and that academic freedom as it operates in the modern university recognizes no constraints.

It is ultimately concluded, though, that this potential for constraint is by no means unique to Catholic universities: "I know of no institution of higher learning where an academic's freedom to teach is not bounded by some restraints... Every institution distinguishes between responsible and irresponsible uses of academic freedom. There must then be standards and criteria of acceptable free performance. Being free is not the last word" (pp. 183-4).

It is both telling and ironic that the most notorious breach of academic freedom in a Catholic university in recent decades serves in many ways to illustrate how highly the Church values the freedom of its faculty. In this case, Charles E. Curran, a Professor with the Department of Theology at the Catholic University of America, was relieved of his position due to the teaching and advocacy of a wide range of issues that stand contrary to official Church doctrine (issues included advocacy of the use of birth control, abortion rights, homosexuality, etc.—*Academe* 1989). However, even when flagrant disregard for the official teachings of the Church was displayed, it took nearly twenty years for the case to be fully processed. More importantly, the primary justification for acting against Professor Curran was that, as a member of the Theology Department, he was an

ecclesiastical faculty member and thus teaching in the name of the Church. Had he worked in an institution other than the Catholic University of America (a Pontifical University) and in a department other than Theology, there is little likelihood that his views and teachings would have been restrained (*Academe* 1989). To some, the Curran case thus serves to illustrate the limited nature of magisterial interference in matters of academic freedom, and the extent of opposition to Catholic doctrine that is required to incur such interference.

In light of these issues, it seems reasonable to conclude that Catholic universities around the country (and world) are making good-faith attempts to mediate fairly between their Catholic missions and the general need for academic freedom. Indeed, one may gain profound respect for the Catholic church's level of tolerance by examining the nature and extent of *other* threats to academic freedom that currently affect higher education—religious and secular.

The Specter of Political Correctness

The phenomenon of political correctness appears to have its roots in the social upheaval of the 1960s and early 1970s. Many scholars have researched the long-ranging impacts (such as political correctness, pressure for secularization, etc.) that the radicalism of this period has had on academia in general, and Catholic institutions of higher education in particular (Gleason 1992; Hentoff 1992; Kimball 1990). For example, Gleason (1992) describes how the anti-authoritarianism prevalent at this time came to clash with both religious and governmental institutions: "... the cultural earthquake of the late sixties could not help exacerbating the Catholic crisis... Catholics heard it said that their church was corrupt and its leaders bankrupt... they heard that their country was a racist imperialist monster, its leaders war criminals" (p. 246). Ironically, the young, anti-authoritarian radicals of this period are now the senior faculty and administrators in many institutions of higher education. And, in many ways, the phenomenon of political correctness has proven them to be no less averse to dissent than their older counterparts were once accused of being.

The power of this phenomenon is evident in the fact that many states and universities have undertaken attempts to regulate the activities of faculty, in order to promote adherence to prevailing social and academic notions of "correctness." A prime example of such an attempt occurred at the University of Michigan, where students were allowed to charge that faculty were teaching offensive course content based upon wholly self-determined criteria (this guideline was later declared unconstitutional—McInerny 1994). Other examples include: the University of Pennsylvania's suspension of a law instructor for two semesters, for specifically asking a black student to recite a portion of the 13th Amendment in a class; Penn State's removal of a Goya painting from a class display, since it portrayed a nude woman and was thus claimed to constitute "sexual harassment"; the expulsion of a student from a class at the University of Washington for challenging an instructor's assertion that lesbian parents are superior to male/female parents (Pack 1993).

Of course, many more cases of this nature have occurred, in which faculty or students who advocate unpopular points of view (or who simply make mistakes) are subject to threats and intimidation from other faculty, students, and/or administrators as a result. It is no secret that most universities and colleges have encountered, and perhaps even grown accustomed to, these kinds of incidents over the last 10 years. In many ways, the aura of intimidation resulting from such cases has become a part of daily life in the academic world. And, while faculty at either extreme of the political spectrum are likely to be subject to such pressures, in today's academic atmosphere it appears far more likely that negative sanctions will be directed at proponents of perspectives or research *not* consonant with the philosophy of political correctness.

A powerful irony in this phenomenon is that the vast majority of adherents to this philosophy would claim to greatly value "diversity," and argue that their stridence against certain ideas or behaviors is an attempt to promote that goal. However, it is apparent that popular academic notions of diversity are somewhat selective in nature. For example, diversity involving certain cross-cultural or physical characteristics is highly valued, while diversity involving certain viewpoints or philosophies (conservatism, many forms of Christianity, etc.) is not. As Marsden (1997) states: "University culture has changed a great deal in the past hundred years, but not at all in the direction of welcoming distinctly Christian viewpoints into the classroom" (p. 190). While it is laudable that the diversity movement confers a high valuation on issues such as gender and racial diversity, it is unfortunate, to say the least, that some of its proponents appear to promote such a devaluation of dissent.

Marsden (1997) lends credence to this point by describing the manner in which religious views appear to be excluded from popular notions of diversity, while a broad range of secular philosophies seem protected by selective interpretations and applications of "academic freedom" (pp. 51-53):

One would not likely say to feminists, Marxists, neo-conservatives, gay advocates, and representatives of other viewpoints that the privatization of their viewpoints would not be a diminishment. The question, as I see it, is whether there is a compelling reason why all religious viewpoints should be placed in the private category... Christians can and should be allowed to explain and defend their own viewpoints and, in the proper settings, attempt to persuade others of their superiority, just as advocates of feminist, Marxist, liberal democratic, neoconservative, or purely naturalistic views often do.

What is truly ironic about such a perspective is that it fails to recognize the contribution that a Catholic education can make to the overall diversity of our society. James Heft (1987), Germain Grisez (1973), and others warn of how the unique character of Catholic universities is diminished through the secularization of faculty. Marsden (1997), in addressing the range of external pressures on Catholic universities (such as accreditation, diversity mandates, etc.), declares that: "Almost all the pressures seem to be in the same direction of imposing academic uniformity at the expense of religious identity" (p. 192). He elaborates that:

One way of understanding the issue is as a question about pluralism, and diversity, and multiculturalism— ideals that the dominant academic culture claims to value highly. The way these ideals are currently conceived is to emphasize that institutions should include representatives of as many diverse cultures as possible. That is a laudable ideal. As it is typically implemented in the dominant academic culture, however, it amounts not to creating diversity among institutions but rather toward making them all look alike. Particular traditions of institutions, including religious traditions, are expected to give way to representing the variety of currently accepted viewpoints... It should be asked, however, whether our culture has room for diversity among institutions as well as within them (p. 192).

Ryan (1995) echoes the sentiment that popular concerns over multiculturalism and diversity should include concern over the religious character of an institution: "To deny that it should would not only reveal a bias against religion as such but a lack of concern for authentic diversity. Thus, even from the standpoint of fostering diversity, Catholic universities would do well to hold fast to their specifically Catholic heritage" (p. 146). Therefore, while many academics may deem the diminution of a religious perspective (or a conservative perspective, or any other non-prevalent perspective) to be "correct," it is evident that this practice is in fact an attack on the very diversity that such persons claim to advocate.

The pressure for political correctness is thus a powerful, pervasive, and highly arbitrary force in today's academic environment. It has the potential to alter academic operation by affecting factors as broad as institutional missions, and as specific and immediate as course content and teaching technique (including the very words one uses to attain learning objectives). The threat such a force presents to academic freedom is profound, and this threat is exacerbated by its proponents' apparent inability or unwillingness to recognize that such pressures indeed constitute a threat.

Contrasting the Dangers from a Sociological Perspective

In viewing this debate as a sociologist, it must be admitted that my own discipline has proved to be one of the more fertile grounds for sentiments consonant with a "politically correct" approach to academic operation. The 1950s and 1960s saw the rise of many so-called "conflict" and "critical" sociological theories that advocated a radical Marxian view of society. Such perspectives tended to view religion in general, and Catholicism in particular, as suspect at best, and exploitive at worst (e.g.- Collins, 1975). Marxist ideology is also not noted for its high degree of tolerance regarding conservative, or even moderate, stands on a variety of other issues. Even lacking the lingering influence of Marxist ideology, sociology is characterized by a strong tradition of secularism humanism that tends to put it at odds with many aspects of Catholic doctrine, as well as conservative socio-political philosophy (Kinney 1997). This orientation tends to promote a strong compatibility between sociology and the political correctness movement.

Given this character, sociology, as well as a host of other social sciences, have been targeted for criticism by some Catholic scholars. For example, Hesburgh (1994) criticizes

the social sciences for their alleged failure to recognize the importance of human values and the human spirit. Somewhat more ominously, Germain Grisez (1973) proposes that the very foundations of social science warrant careful scrutiny from religious scholars (pp. 54-55):

...most fundamentally, Catholic scholars should try to uncover the concealed assumptions in the social sciences, and propose interpretations of human life consonant with faith. To what extent there exists a neutral body of social knowledge is uncertain, but existing social sciences seem to be based on questionable assumptions about the nature of man, the status of values, and the origin of history in free human acts.

Given this clear tension between major portions of the social-scientific community and the Catholic church, it would seem likely that conflicts over matters of academic freedom would be both frequent and pronounced. However, having worked in a Catholic university for a number of years, and knowing a substantial number of other sociologists (some of an extremely radical perspective) working in a variety of Catholic institutions of higher education, I am familiar with not one infringement against our academic freedoms (from this particular source). This is in spite of the fact that even introductory courses in this discipline may cover a wide range of topics that are highly controversial in nature (abortion, homosexuality, etc.). And, while the observations of one person in no way constitute conclusive evidence of a lack of such infringements, the highly limited character of the Curran case tends to indicate that more widespread restrictions of academic freedom (such as interventions in sociological teaching and research) are indeed very unlikely. For example, it is difficult to imagine the Catholic church restricting a sociologist's right to discuss birth control when examining overpopulation, utilize a feminist approach in understanding issues of gender inequality, or promote tolerance or acceptance of homosexual behavior when discussing changing family structures. Such difficulty stands as a testament to the respect for academic freedom displayed by the Catholic church, at this point in time.

It is also important, however, to question the ease with which a sociologist (or a professor in any other discipline, for that matter) may assume stands on the opposite sides of these issues. Given the stridence of today's academic climate, imagine the difficulty and derision a professor would experience if he/she advocated an abolition of birth control, intolerance of homosexuality, and/or proclaimed him/herself to be anti-feminist (political correctness dictates that it must be clear that I, personally, do not advocate such stands—merely the freedom to dissent from prevailing norms on these or any other issues). Even within a Catholic university, where such views may be consonant with some aspects of Catholic theology, the advocacy of these unpopular stands would surely invoke the ire of most students, faculty, and administrators. This capacity for intimidation stands as a testament to the power of political correctness.

In essence, when one honestly assesses the extent of church interventions in teaching and research, and compares the scope of such interventions to the score of state laws, university policies, and interpersonal pressures directed against those who dare stray (in the "wrong" direction) from the norms of today's dominant academic culture, one

discovers where the greater threat to academic freedom lies. While the Catholic church may indeed represent a threat to academic freedom, and while vigilance regarding the nature of this threat is truly warranted, it would seem wise for academicians— of *all* political persuasions to direct equal or greater vigilance towards combating those forces that have proven a far greater threat in the last decade.

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