

Academic Freedom

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“Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.”

– 2 Cor. 3:17

“For freedom Christ has set us free.”

– Gal 5:1

“For we cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth.”

– 2 Cor. 13:8

“For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to bear witness to the truth.”

– John 18:37

This article considers academic freedom—understood as a scholar’s freedom of conscience to pursue research without interference or retribution—and its application within the Church as a freedom to think, ask questions, speak, do research, and propose new ideas that address contemporary culture. After cataloging some of the challenges to academic freedom, the article looks at the gospel basis for an Orthodox approach and at the ways two contemporary thinkers, Jaroslav Pelikan and Metropolitan Kallistos Ware, have defended academic freedom. The article ends with an admission that finding spaces within contemporary Orthodoxy for academic freedom is almost impossible, and considers proposals from two conservative Orthodox writers, Rod Dreher and Frederica Mathewes-Green, for bridging divides between Orthodox Christians with very different points of view.

Freedom, Conscience, and Truth

Academic freedom is inextricable from conscience and the pursuit of truth. Here is one definition of “academic freedom”:

The right of scholars to study and report on any problem that their curiosity and conscience dictate, without fear of retribution. This right may be infringed when studies are paid for by governments, industries, or faith-based groups that exert their authority to suppress, censor, or alter findings, forbid certain lines of inquiry, or interfere with the dissemination of results.¹

In the age of “fake news,” the freedom to explore truth and reality is under threat everywhere and from all sides. And of course our age isn’t unique.

¹“Academic freedom” in *Dictionary of Public Health*, ed. John M. Last (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110916142807477>



Christ teaching in the synagogue. Fresco at Visoki Dečani monastery, Serbia, 14th c.

Ever since the serpent beguiled Adam and Eve with lies about God (Gen. 3:1), the Father of Lies has been sowing tares to pollute, obfuscate, confuse, distract, and set people at enmity. A friend of mine, Rabbi Martin S. Cohen, has a deeply insightful book coming out this year on *Spiritual Integrity*. His contention is that intellectual freedom and unwavering dedication to truth is the highway to communion with God that connects the honest faithful of all religious groups. This is also what separates them from their own co-religionists who are unsettled by too much honesty and freedom and feel threatened by questions, sensing that these might undermine comfortable beliefs and practices.²

It is a temptation to conflate academic freedom simply with “free speech” without affirming its connection to the pursuit of truth. The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU) couples freedom of speech with “critical evaluation.”³

The college classroom is not a talk show. Rather, it is a dedicated context in which students and teachers seriously engage difficult and contested questions with the goal of reaching beyond differing viewpoints to a critical evaluation of the relative claims of different positions.

Critical evaluation in the pursuit of truth is especially necessary at a time when diversity is often seen as an end in itself.

Central to the educational aims and spirit of academic freedom, diversity of perspectives is a means to an end in higher education, not an end in itself. Including diversity is a step in the larger quest for new understanding and insight. But an overemphasis on diversity of perspectives as an end in itself threatens to distort the larger responsibilities of intellectual work in the academy.

² Martin S. Cohen, *Spiritual Integrity* (New York: Hamilton Books, forthcoming).

³ “Academic Freedom and Educational Responsibility” (Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2006), <https://www.aacu.org/sites/default/files/files/about/academicFreedom.pdf>.

While “academic freedom” and guidelines of the AACU are addressed to schools, colleges, seminaries and universities, they are not irrelevant to the exercise of freedom in our churches, to the imperative that clergy and faithful should explore problems and express their conscience without fear of retribution. Here the Church and the academy ought to share a commitment not only to freedom of speech, but also to the pursuit of truth.

Academic Freedom as a Problem in the Orthodox Church

Without naming names, just from my own network I can compile quite a list of anecdotal evidence that academic freedom is being torpedoed in all parts of the Orthodox world. I’m sure readers could do the same. A scholar expelled from his church for publicly disagreeing theologically with his bishop, who then wrote defamatory letters to non-Orthodox theological schools urging them to blacklist him from any teaching post. Scholars self-censoring their research, writing, teaching, and conference attendance for fear of retribution from bishops, administration, trustees. Bishops, trustees, and donors questioning and criticizing teaching and research and threatening withdrawal of donations. Faculty and clergy being forbidden from collaborating with “liberal” institutions, publications, or websites. Lay scholars reluctant to be ordained over anxiety about losing their academic freedom in the ecclesiastical establishment. They know that clergy often are fearful of expressing their honest views.

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 colleagues and institutions. Here too there is plenty of anecdotal evidence, mostly concerning scholars who dare to express their traditional views on sexuality (or who self-censor out of fear of reprisals). Many of these scholars 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, even if free speech rules would seem to offer legal protection for dissent. David French of *National Review* noted that conservative students and professors “can choose to speak in spite of the blowback. They can choose to endure the slings and arrows of critics or scolds. They can train themselves to speak persuasively in the face of opposition. Free-speech rules can make speech possible, but they can never make it easy. The legal revolution is underway, but there is no substitute for simple courage, and courage goes a long way toward frustrating the peer censors of the culturally intolerant Left.”⁴

That’s true. But of course the same could be said of those whose peer censors are on the “culturally intolerant” Right. And for scholars in the Orthodox Church, that is most often the source of slings and arrows.

Tradition and 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 within itself as an entire category of self-criticism, renewal, and reform. The prophet can call the community to do better, to return to its vocation, or to leave its

⁴ David French, “America Is in the Middle of a Quiet Free-Speech Revolution on Campus,” *National Review*, June 11, 2019, <https://www.nationalreview.com/2019/06/america-is-in-the-middle-of-quiet-free-speech-revolution-on-campus/>.

comfort zone and head into unfamiliar territory. This prophetic teaching, in both Old and New Testaments, is undomesticated, messy, and unpredictable. Our Lord Jesus Christ continued this raw prophetic tradition. It was his questioning of the received tradition that put the religious leaders on edge and pushed them to call for his crucifixion.

New Testament encounters with Jesus often pit an ideology of tradition against real-life experience. That process played out repeatedly in the lives of faithful Jews who encountered Jesus. But it was an understandable struggle for those raised on faithfulness to the written and oral Torah. It is no wonder that some of the most faithful couldn't be budged, or—like Paul—needed a special intervention.

A striking example of the collision between traditionalism and experience is the account of the man born blind whom Jesus heals on the Sabbath (John 9). The Pharisees refuse to believe the healing happened at all, but when thwarted on that line of attack, they revert to ideology. Whether the healing has happened or not is irrelevant because they have already decided that Jesus is not from God. This is the very picture of prejudice. They dismiss the competence of the formerly blind man to make a judgment. Their tradition supersedes whatever conclusions the man might want to draw from his experience. The healed man then reasons logically (1) that he was miraculously healed, (2) that this is a good thing (3) that good things come from God, (4) that Jesus must therefore come from God, and (5) that if the teachers of the law can't see this, then despite their learning they must be ignorant of God's ways. The man refuses to bend to the ideology of tradition and rests his case on the *evidence* of his

personal experience. But the teachers are contemptuous of him. "You were born in utter sin, and would you teach us?" And they cast him out." (John 9:35) Jesus tells the Pharisees that it is their unwillingness to admit new evidence that makes them guilty. So, while they are faithfully conservative, they are increasingly out of touch with reality. Jesus tells them, "If you were blind, you would have no guilt; but now you say "we see," your guilt remains" (John 9:41).

This example illustrates the tension that Jesus' teaching brought to the religious leaders who—in fairness—had built their spiritual world on faithfulness to divinely given tradition as they understood it. Indeed, such was their commitment to their tradition that they saw even the healing miracles of Jesus as the work of the devil (see, for example, Matt. 12:22–32). In these cases, keeping the tradition blinded the religious leaders to interpreting experience correctly. Of course, from *their* perspective, it was Jesus who was perpetrating demonic blindness under the guise of goodness.

Throughout the gospels one can find illustrations of Jesus' courage in speaking the truth freely (and the consequences of that courage). According to the Gospel of Luke, his first foray into public speaking, despite an auspicious beginning, did not end well. The hometown crowd in Nazareth at first "wondered at the gracious words which proceeded out of his mouth," but then turned ugly when they perceived his sharp critique. Then "all in the synagogue were filled with wrath" and tried to throw him off a cliff (Luke 4:16–30). 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 the religious leaders, “Excuse me, but would you mind if I said this?” He thus demonstrated time after time that freedom is taken, not given. And he accepted the consequences.

No prophet, martyr, or saint was shut down for being too polite and obedient. As Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote in his “Letter From Birmingham Jail”: “We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed.”⁵ Similarly, academic freedom only becomes an issue when it is breached, when someone in authority doesn’t like what you said or wrote or are researching. And at that point you have to decide whether your integrity allows you to back down, or if it’s an issue of such consequence that you need to stand your ground.

Pelikan and Ware 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.”⁶

Pelikan based his book on John Henry Newman’s *The Idea of a University*. Newman himself, while still an Anglican, tangled with university and ecclesiastical authorities for speaking and writing on behalf of the Oxford Movement and the Tractarians, who argued that no church could be “catholic” without being faithful



to the early and undivided Church. He wrote *The Idea of a University* in 1854—nine years after he was received into the Roman Catholic Church—when he became rector of a new Catholic university in Dublin. But he must have had his troubling Oxford experience in mind when he subsequently described the ideals of give and take, open questioning, debate, and mutual correction that are at the heart of university life. The university, he wrote, is a place “in which the intellect may safely range and speculate, sure to find its equal in some antagonist activity, and its judge in the tribunal of truth. It is a place where inquiry is pushed forward, and discoveries verified and perfected, and rashness rendered innocuous, and error exposed, by the collision of mind with mind, and knowledge with knowledge.”⁷

This ideal ought to apply equally to the Church, which was indeed the model for the university as a learn-

Christ healing the blind man, from the *Maestà*. Duccio di Buoninsegna, c. 1308.

⁵ 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: Harper-Collins, 1992), 90, 87.

⁶ Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Idea of the University: A Reexamination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 48, 55.

ing community. However, given the sad history of the Church over two thousand years, Pelikan was pessimistic about the ability of its institutions to be communities of freedom and intellectual honesty. He admits, "I have been disappointed so often in institutional Christendom." But at least educational institutions—colleges, universities and seminaries—could be beacons of hope. "The university is, in God's good world, the principal community through which human rationality can examine all existing communities, families and structures—including itself, but also including the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church—and thus can help them to become what they are."⁸

Not surprisingly, Metropolitan Kallistos Ware takes a similar view of the educational institution as a place for the freedom to discover a wider and wider picture of reality: "A college is a place where we constantly discover new rooms in the universe and in the human heart, in both macrocosm and microcosm; a place where we open the door to each other and invite one another to explore these rooms together." He goes on to say 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. All three are linked:

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."

. . . As a place for learning freedom, [the college's] role is well expressed in a Jewish saying recorded by Martin Buber in his *Tales of the Hasidim*. Rabbi Shelomo asked: "What is the worst thing the evil urge can achieve?" And he answered: "To make us forget that we are each the child of a king."⁹

Working Around the Impasses

In the Orthodox Church we need many more spaces for the free and respectful exchange of ideas. While I was chancellor of the Orthodox Church in America, I was often involved in discussions about policy and communications, about how much freedom of debate there should be in a hierarchical church, how much expert advice and "crowd-sourcing" (if any) from scholars, let alone rank-and-file clergy and laity. On one such occasion, at a meeting of the OCA's Metropolitan Council, the question of the limits of thought and discussion within the Church came up. And while there were some who wanted to see more strictures in place to maintain good order and a consistent message, others warned that we needed to be careful about restricting freedom. Judge E. R. Lanier, chair of the legal committee, wrote:

Consideration needs to be given to the fact that what is "editorial policy" for one is little more than a prior restraint on freedom of speech and opinion for another. Should we not provide a forum for an exchange of ideas, even if those ideas are exposed to be heresy and contrary to Orthodox dogmatic and moral principles? Putting a thought in a closet (so to speak) is rarely a good way of

⁷ John Henry Newman, *The Office and Work of Universities* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1856), 24.

⁸ Pelikan, 67.

⁹ Kallistos Ware, "A Sense of Wonder," in *The Inner Kingdom* (Crestwood: SVS Press, 2000), 73–74.

demonstrating how wrong it really is.¹⁰

In the fractured and polarized world that increasingly infects the church, finding “a forum for an exchange of ideas” is becoming almost impossible. Even the term “dialogue” is now often dismissed as a covert attempt to convert. “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.

So 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 encouraged by approaches I heard from two conservative Orthodox writers, Rod Dreher and Frederica Mathewes-Green. The two were giving a presentation together on “How To Listen to Those Who Disagree.” This was at the Advanced Leadership Conference at St. Vladimir’s Seminary in September 2018.

Rod Dreher made the point that American culture has become emotivist: “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. Now, before you try to convince people why they might be wrong, you first need to listen empathetically to understand *why* they believe what they believe. He admitted that over many years as a combative opinion journalist, he built his career on argument. But as he came to appreciate the deep emotivist current, he realized that he had to take a step back, to better understand where others were coming from. At that stage his aim was to listen empa-

thetically but without surrendering his own judgment.

In her presentation Frederica Mathewes-Green built on Dreher’s foundation with a very practical protocol based on her own experience in the 1980s trying to find common ground between pro-choice and pro-life women who were friends but could not find a way to have a fruitful conversation. They agreed to set aside polemical arguments and prejudices, and see if they could listen to each other in order to understand what life experiences had led to their respective positions. Neither side was abandoning their principles, but at this stage their aim was to clear away misunderstandings. “We wanted to overcome misunderstanding so we could come to *genuine* disagreement.”

This is how they organized the conversation. Two people with opposed views (A and B) took turns, while the others listened and did not interrupt:

- A answers the question: “What experience brought you to this position?”
- B asks clarifying questions and summarizes respectfully and as accurately as possible what she has heard.
- A accepts or corrects B’s summary.
- They switch roles.

In the course of this conversation, participants followed several ground rules: (1) Focus on stories of personal experience, (2) don’t try to persuade others, (3) call others by the name they choose, and (4) ask sincere (not rhetorical) questions, to which you don’t know the answer.

This kind of approach may not bring one side over to the other, but it’s not designed to do that. It’s designed to fa-

¹⁰ E. R. Lanier, January 28, 2015, email communication (quoted with permission).

cilitate the sharing not just of ideas but of personal experiences. And whether or not minds are changed, that kind of engagement with one other in an atmosphere of freedom and truth surely helps build up the body of Christ.



One of the most forceful and refreshing voices for freedom in the Orthodox Church comes from Mother Maria Skobtsova. Seventy-five years have passed since her execution in a Nazi concentration camp, but her words remain striking testimony that the Church today can do better.

We cannot see the church as a sort of aesthetic perfection and limit ourselves to aesthetic swooning—our God-given freedom calls us to activity and struggle. And it would be a great lie to tell searching souls: “Go to church, because there you will find peace.” The opposite is true.

She tells those who are at peace and asleep: “Go to church, because there you will feel real alarm about your sins, about your perdition, about the world’s sins and perdition. There you will feel an unappeasable hunger for Christ’s truth. There instead of lukewarm you will become ardent, instead of pacified you will become alarmed, instead of learning the wisdom of this world you will become foolish in Christ.”

It is to this foolishness, this folly in Christ, that our freedom calls us. Freedom calls us, contrary to the whole world, contrary not only to the pagans but to many who style themselves Christians, to undertake the Church’s work in what is precisely the most difficult way. And we will become fools in Christ, because we know not only the difficulty of this path but also the immense happiness of feeling God’s hand upon what we do.¹¹ *

¹¹ Mother Maria (Skobtsova), *Essential Writings*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003), 112–5.



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