Epistulae
National Humanities Institute
No. 19 • March 26, 2015

Politics & Culture

Kirk's Conservative Canons and the Case for Academic Freedom

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Conservatives have had a complicated relationship with academic freedom. It is not immediately clear that conservatives should support academic freedom in that the case often made for academic freedom involves a sort of unleashing, a free play of all ideas in which it is naively assumed that truth will win out. It has been used as a flimsy defense for notoriously bad scholarship on the simple grounds that all ideas should get a hearing, as well as an excuse for something approaching indoctrination under the cover of pedagogy. The late conservative editor and writer William F. Buckley, Jr., attacked academic freedom in his 1951 book *God and Man at Yale*[1] on precisely these grounds.

Few of any ideological stripe would dispute that academic freedom is frequently abused in precisely the manner Buckley describes, using the classroom for indoctrination rather than the search for truth. However, it does not follow that the institution should be abandoned or that it is merely a superstition. Russell Kirk responded to Buckley and other critics of academic freedom with his 1955 book *Academic Freedom: An Essay in Definition*.[2] As a tradition of the Western university, academic freedom is a long-standing practice and one that, according to Kirk, has a conservative pedigree. Rather than a dissembling superstition, Kirk demonstrates how the tradition of granting academic freedom to scholars and teachers embodies the university's commitment to the search for truth. This essay explores Kirk's defense of academic freedom with reference to his six canons of conservative thought, famously enumerated in the introduction to *The Conservative Mind*.

Buckley argued against academic freedom on the grounds that it was simply a "superstition," a mere cover for indoctrination. And not only did Buckley believe that his description was true, but that the supporters of academic freedom knew it to be true. Buckley writes,

> I believe it to be an indisputable fact that most colleges and universities, and certainly Yale, the protests and pretensions of their educators and theorists notwithstanding, do not practice, cannot practice, and cannot even believe what they say about education and academic freedom.[3]

Buckley attacked the notion of "*laissez-faire* education, that "'all sides should be presented impartially,' that the student should be encouraged to select the side that pleases him most."[4] For him, this was impossible. In every discipline

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Epistulae (ə-pis´-tŭ-lā), Latin (n., pl.): letters or correspondence. An occasional publication of the National Humanities Institute, *Epistulae* seeks to provide clarity and insight on significant issues of our time. While addressed to the educated public, it aspires to high scholarly standards.

there are standards. Some poetry is good, and some is bad. The good poetry professor discriminates against bad poetry and favors good poetry in his assignments. He cannot teach all poetry, so he must decide what is worth teaching and only add that poetry to the syllabus.[5] If rhetoric regarding academic freedom were believed, such basic discernment regarding the teaching of good poetry would be a violation of academic freedom because all ideas deserve a hearing.

According to Buckley, the same sort of discernment should be exercised regarding good economics and right religion. "The truth of Christianity and free enterprise, Buckley argued, had been established by history and tradition."[6] An institution as prominent and important as Yale should propagate such truths. For Buckley, capitalism and Christianity were clearly superior to their ideological rivals in the eyes of Yale's alumni and administration. However, Yale continued to teach socialism and denigrate religion in its economics and religion departments while claiming to teach capitalism and Christianity when fundraising with alumni. Buckley described this situation as Yale's "twilight zone of hypocrisy with respect to her alumni."[7]

When Buckley and others complained about the curriculum, Yale defended its purportedly socialist and secular professors on the grounds of academic freedom. For Buckley, academic freedom served as a cover for the teaching of their ideology. Buckley did not argue against the teaching of ideology, but advocated that Yale teach the *right* ideology.

Yale's alumni should remedy Yale's situation by refusing to fund Yale's hypocrisy and, through their substantial financial means, force Yale to uphold the values of the alumni, namely, capitalism and Christianity. Moneyed interests should determine the content of the curriculum at Yale. While Buckley decried "*laissez-faire* education" in the classroom, where all ideas could gain an equal hearing, he advocated for a different type of laissez-faire education in which wealthy alumni would determine the ideology of the curriculum. In other words, "The alumni, as the purchasers and consumers of Yale's product, and as the supporters of Yale through their contributions, deserved the same sovereignty as did the consumer in the marketplace."[8] Buckley's Yale would be an institution for the advancement of the ideology of its alumni.

Russell Kirk's response in *Academic Freedom* to Buckley's argument rests on the contention that academic freedom, whatever abuses may occur under that name, is a valuable tradition that reflects the high mission of the university to search for truth. Furthermore, he argues from conservative principles to arrive at a defense of academic freedom that proves more robust than most liberal defenses of the institution. A helpful way to understand Kirk's conservative defense of academic freedom is through his six canons of conservative thought described in the introduction to *The Conservative Mind*, published just two years before *Academic Freedom*:[9]

1. "Belief in a transcendent order, or body of natural law, which rules society as well as conscience."
2. "Affection for the proliferating variety and mystery of human existence . . . ."
3. "Conviction that civilized society requires orders and classes . . . ."
4. "Persuasion that freedom and property are closely linked . . . ."
5. "Faith in prescription and distrust of 'sophisters, calculators, and economists' who would reconstruct society upon abstract designs. Custom, convention, and old prescription are checks both upon man's anarchic impulse and upon the innovator's lust for power."
6. "Recognition that change may not be salutary reform: hasty innovation may be a devouring conflagration, rather than a torch of progress."

Kirk draws his main arguments from the first canon, the belief "in a transcendent moral order, or body of natural law, which rules society as well as conscience." Man's search for these truths is eternally significant. They are not determined by state authority, popular opinion, or scholarly consensus. The search for truth lies outside the needs or wants of society. Academic freedom assures that the institutional university cannot abrogate that search on the basis of political pressure or even scholarly disagreement.

This is not to say that society does not benefit

from academic freedom. It does, but academic freedom's benefit to society is not its primary justification. The academy is part of society, and society benefits when it pursues its proper function. But it exists for its function, the pursuit of truth, and not for the benefit to society. The latter is tangential to the primary purpose of the university. To put it another way, the academy does benefit society, but only when it ignores society's needs and fulfills its primary purpose.

The academy's function of pursuing truth draws from the purpose of the original Academy of Plato in Athens, which was founded "to pursue the Truth without being servants of an evanescent community."[10] Indeed, the Academy often found itself at odds with the political powers of Athens. Nonetheless, the Academy is one of Athens' finest bequests to the world. Its independence from the political powers is what allowed it to critique its age. The Academy's perceptive insights into the nature of political existence have enlightened political discourse ever since.

The medieval university, while not a direct descendent of Plato's Academy, existed for the same reason. "The philosopher, the scholar, and the student," Kirk writes, "were looked upon as men consecrated to the service of Truth."[11] It was due to its mission of seeking truth that it was granted peculiar freedom compared to other associations in medieval society. The freedom of the medieval academy attached to its founding purpose, the pursuit, preservation, and propagation of truth.

Academic freedom as a custom attached to the scholar and teacher because of his vocation of pursuing truth. Kirk defines academic freedom as "the enduring idea of a special liberty, or body of liberties, that is attached to the academic institution, the teacher, and the scholar."[12] The understanding of truth as absolute and immutable did not demand restriction of discussion to accepted notions of truth. Rather, freedom of the search was inherent within the idea of the abidingness of truth and the moral and intellectual fallibility of humanity.

Truth is inexhaustible and eternal, but human beings will only ever partially grasp it. Freedom to discuss and dispute arises from the recognition that truth partakes of the universal, but human beings are finite and their understanding constrained by experience and historical context. Such finite beings should not be empowered to shut down discussion and debate, which inevitably would close off further elucidation of truth.

This understanding of the particularity and tenuousness of human existence combined with a belief in the universality and absoluteness of truth is related to Kirk's second canon of conservative thought, that conservatives have "affection for a proliferating variety and mystery of human existence." Differences of opinion do not challenge the universality of truth, but confirm the particularity and finitude of human existence. Variety is not a challenge to conservatives, and the mystery of existence is not a challenge to truth, but an invitation to its continuing pursuit.

If truth is absolute and beyond any human capacity fully to grasp, then the search for truth requires liberty from human authority, as it, too, is finite and subject to error. Academic freedom as a custom and rule is a product of this understanding of truth. It arose and endured because it accurately reflected the nature of man's search for truth. Academic freedom as a custom attached to the scholar and teacher because of his vocational purpose of pursuing truth. Kirk defines academic freedom as "the enduring idea of a special liberty, or body of liberties, that is attached to the academic institution, the teacher, and the scholar."[13] The scholar is dedicated to the pursuit of truth and no devotion outside of that pursuit can claim a higher allegiance.

No scholar has an inherent claim to truth. Vigorous debate must accompany this search. According to Kirk, this is the reason the medieval university guarded its privileges and autonomy. Scholars were

> free from external interference and free from stifling internal conformity, because the whole purpose of the universities was the search after an enduring truth, beside which worldly aggrandizement was as nothing.[14]

And it is for the continuation of this idea that the university defends itself still.

This discussion of academic freedom as a privilege attaching peculiarly to the scholar and the teacher reflects Kirk's third canon of conservative thought: "civilized society requires orders and classes." The citizen has constitutional rights, but the privilege of academic freedom attaches peculiarly to the class of scholars and teachers and not to those in every vocation. The scholar and teach-

er occupy the place of a sort of aristocracy, sitting apart from society and pursuing truth aloof from the particular social concerns and political pressures of the day. Kirk dubs the scholar a "Guardian of the Word."[15] The scholar works for the sake of truth, the teacher works for the sake of private endowment of truth, and neither for the relief of immediate social concerns. Kirk writes:

> The principal importance of academic freedom is the opportunity it affords for the highest development of private reason and imagination, the improvement of mind and heart by the apprehension of Truth, whether or not that development is of any immediate use to [society].[16]

This is not to excuse the scholar and teacher from his or her role in the community. Individuals educated in the realm of academic freedom, endowed with intelligence and the moral imagination, are essential to any society. Such an education is not meant for everyone, but "to develop the character and talents of individuals" who then offer ethical example and leadership to the community at large.[17] The scholar's role as teacher is essential to the imaginative formation of the community.

It is to the class of scholars and teachers that the tasks protected by academic freedom fall, to search for truth and to educate a portion of the public. To them is given the ability to study and express unpopular ideas, shielded from punishment. The result is that society, which requires such external criticism, will benefit from an articulation of truth bereft of immediate political or social value.

This function of the academy provides society with fresh criticism. It serves society, but is not at the service of society. It is protected by what amounts to an aristocratic privilege because the larger social whole requires the existence of various classes, each working within its own sphere to its own end. When there are conflicts and criticisms emerging between them, the lack of unity should not be cause for concern but for celebration of the plurality of authority and function. The political and social powers of the day cannot dictate to institutions assigned the search for truth what the outcome or methods of their search should be.

Kirk points to John Dewey's theories of education as problematic precisely because his aim is to produce good democratic citizens, uniform in fundamental beliefs and trained to pursue the common democratic good. In Dewey's scheme, as viewed by Kirk, no class exists to provide outside criticism. Education is not a means of achieving a higher imaginative and intellectual standard, whatever the diversity of those achievements, but a means of indoctrination in the values, democratic or otherwise, of the ruling regime.

Kirk describes this understanding of education as "recreation, socialization, and a kind of custodial jurisdiction over young people."[18] It is hardly the high-minded pursuit of truth that would necessitate a special freedom for scholars and teachers in Dewey's academy.

Kirk's understanding of academic freedom demonstrates a profound respect for the plurality and diversity of society. He defends religious universities on the grounds that it is precisely out of the religious impulse to defend the search for truth that academic freedom arose. Religious universities would very well have their own academic flavor, depending upon their denominational affiliation and history, which would provide diversity across academic institutions. This is a reflection of the idea in his fourth canon of conservative thought, that "freedom and property are closely linked."[19] The private university is private property and is thus entitled to have its own mission.

Some sectarian schools will put their sectarian mission above academic freedom, some will link the two together, and still others will place primacy on academic freedom as appropriate to the academic institution. Whichever way an academic institution chooses, diversity among institutions is healthy for society and especially for the academic enterprise.

Buckley would accept academic freedom for institutions. Some, such as his expressed hope for Yale, would be Christian and capitalist and others atheist and socialist.[20] But Kirk believed that academic freedom, in light of its historic attachment to scholars and teachers as individuals engaged in a particular vocation as "guardians of the word," would provide for a plurality of opinion not only between institutions, but between individual scholars at the same institution. It "would be a dull and unhealthy place," Kirk writes, "if such variety did not exist."[21]

The conservative, the liberal, and even the

radicalall have their place within the academy. The conservative preserves what is best from the bank and capital of ages, the liberal applies such principles to changing circumstances as the means of social preservation, and the radical identifies corruption and the occasional necessity of substantial reform. This is not to say that these roles hold equal value in the academic enterprise. Kirk writes: "[B]oth the conservative bent and the liberal bent should not only be tolerated, but encouraged. If there were no liberals, we should find it necessary to invent some; if there were no conservatives—but perish that thought."[22]

The wisdom inherent in academic freedom as a custom arising over time and attaching to scholars and scholarly institutions as they pursued their vocation echoes Kirk's fifth canon of conservative thought: "Faith in prescription and distrust of 'sophisters, calculators, and economists' who would reconstruct society upon abstract designs." In this vein, Kirk notes that "Custom, convention, and old prescription are checks both upon man's anarchic impulse and upon the innovator's lust for power."[23]

Academic freedom may allow sophists to opine, but it also restrains administrative innovators who claim they better understand the needs and purposes of the academic community than the scholars who compose it. The custom of academic freedom better serves the purpose of the academy than imposing upon all scholars the political opinion of the hour. Such customs of restraint provide a better support for the functions of educational institutions over the long run than do the dictates of the innovators—even when, upon occasion, such innovators may have a point.

Buckley had published a critical review of Kirk's book in a 1955 issue of *The Freeman*, writing that Kirk "blandly assumes that all teachers are scholars engaged in searching out truth."[24] But Kirk readily granted Buckley's point that academic freedom is often a cover for sophistry. He acknowledged that the university was rife with sophists, none of whom deserved academic freedom because none of them was dedicated to the search for truth, the exercise from which academic freedom receives its sanction. However, any effort to revoke tenure would no doubt become an ideological witch hunt, and many philosophers, those devoted to the pursuit of truth, would be uprooted along with sophists.

"It is only out of concern for the Philosophers that the Sophists are tolerated in their license," Kirk writes.[25] While the philosopher requires academic freedom in order to pursue truth, he defends it even for the sophist. For it is precisely the sophist, because he trades the search for truth for the pursuit of power, who cannot be relied upon to defend academic freedom as part and parcel of the search for truth. The sophist will defend academic freedom when it serves his ulterior purposes and ignore or partake in its abrogation when it does not.

Kirk even went so far in his defense of academic freedom as to oppose removing bona fide communists from the faculty, as advocated by liberals of the time such as Professor Sidney Hook. Kirk argued that firing communists would be too great a threat to the sacred doctrine of tenure, one of academic freedom's institutional mainstays. No merely ideological disagreement could justify violating a tenure contract, designed to protect the search for truth from the ideological pressures of the age. The custom of academic freedom was too important to be jeopardized over political concerns.

Related to this defense of academic freedom as a custom is Kirk's sixth canon of conservative thought: "Recognition that change may not be salutary reform: hasty innovation may be a devouring conflagration, rather than a torch of progress." Kirk set himself against the reforms of Dewey and Buckley, among others. Both would alter the purpose and structure of education, doing away with the custom of academic freedom and reorienting the academy according to their ideological predilections, however different they might be.

Kirk was suspicious of anyone who heralded wholesale reform of an institution hundreds of years old and advocated abandoning privileges long attached to it. In the case of academic freedom, these privileges link the academic institution to its historical goal of seeking, articulating, and teaching about truth. When the custom of academic freedom is abandoned, the struggle for power dominates the halls of academia.

Buckley viewed the high-minded rhetoric that accompanied academic freedom as nothing but a dissembling mechanism to distract from the real struggle for ideological power within the uni-

versity. Through *God and Man at Yale* he sought to pull the mask off that struggle and reveal its true nature, and to encourage Yale's alumni to assert their own power for their own ideological purposes. For Buckley, the struggle for truth was ultimately a struggle for the propagation of a set of principles, namely, those associated with Christianity and individualism. It was a struggle for power to disseminate a particular view of truth, which was given in set formulations.

Academic freedom as a principle accompanying the search for truth made no sense in Buckley's understanding. Buckley could accuse Kirk of ignoring the true intentions of academics, many of whom were, indeed, sophists pursuing their own ideological agendas and indoctrination schemes under cover of academic freedom, because he did not connect freedom with the search for truth. Truth was, for Buckley, a set of ideological principles that could be taught, and he saw no reason why institutions with such wide influence should not teach such principles as dogmas.

Buckley, then, would reduce education and the scholarly enterprise to indoctrination in particular dogmas. His Christian individualist amounted to little more than a cog in the wheels of capitalist society, reciting a certain creed. This is not to say that Kirk rejected creeds, but that for him the academy was not simply a means of advancing particular principles, even if those principles were economic freedom, Christianity, or liberal democracy. Rather, the institution existed to shelter and to nurture the search for truth in an environment of prescriptive freedom.

Kirk's traditionalist conservatism articulated so eloquently in *The Conservative Mind* served as a guide in disputes over seemingly unrelated issues, such as that of academic freedom discussed here. The exploration of academic freedom helps to concretize the principles of traditional conservatism and demonstrate the way in which they serve as more than abstract principles and much more than window dressing for the status quo. Rather, those principles undergird a humane order, a plurality of functions and authority supportive of robust freedom balanced with stable continuity, and the search for truth combined with the freedom to dissent.

Notes

1. William F. Buckley, Jr., *God and Man at Yale* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 1986).
2. Russell Kirk, *Academic Freedom: An Essay in Definition*, (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1955).
3. Buckley, *God and Man*, 131.
4. Ibid., lxvii.
5. Ibid., 132.
6. Bruce Frohnen, Jeremy Beer, and Jeffrey O. Nelson, eds., *American Conservatism: An Encyclopedia* (Wilmington, DE : ISI Books, 2006), 352.
7. Buckley, *God and Man*, 109.
8. Frohnen et al., *American Conservatism*, 352.
9. Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind*: *From Burke to Eliot*, (Washington, DC: Henry Regnery Company, 1953, 1985), 8-9.
10. Kirk, *Academic Freedom*, 12.
11. Ibid., 17.
12. Ibid., 3.
13. Ibid., 3.
14. Ibid., 18.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid., 27.
17. W. Wesley McDonald, *Russell Kirk and the Age of Ideology* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 2004), 174-5.
18. Kirk, *Academic Freedom*, 45.
19. Kirk, *Conservative Mind*, 9.
20. For Buckley, the mission makes a private university coherent. By mission, he means a set of principles the university lauds and propagates. Buckley, *God and Man*, lviii.
21. Kirk, *Academic Freedom*, 159.
22. Ibid. This variety is not aimed at all institutions, but at the academy as a particular type of institution, namely, one that aims at the pursuit of truth. Kirk would not have advocated a similar freedom and diversity to attach to the family or the church. These institutions exist for different purposes with different functions and therefore different authority, structure, and attendant privileges.
23. Kirk, *Conservative Mind*, 9.
24. William F. Buckley, Jr., "Essay in Confusion," *The Freeman*, July 1955.
25. Kirk, *Academic Freedom*, 189.