Submission to the Expanded Reason Awards

(Research Category)

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Suitability of Work for the Expanded Reason Awards

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“Transcending Academic Orthodoxies and Pursuing Truth in its Wholeness”

Abstract:
The following paper argues that academic freedom, righty understood, is the guarantor of “expanded reason,” which I understand as the drive to explore reality beyond what can be known through ordinary disciplinary methods of inquiry. In order to rightly understand the true meaning of academic freedom, however, we must adopt a properly theological understanding of its finality. The work proposed for the Expanded Reasons award (research category), will be an extension of the material in this paper. Specifically, while the majority of this paper focuses on historical and theological concepts of academic freedom, and how the research of scientists, whether or not they are aware of it, implicitly moves toward an infinite horizon. The author does not address the social sciences and literature in any detail. The work that arises from this project, however, will extend the implications of this paper to the telos of the social sciences, and to the explicit and implicit moral and spiritual horizons expressed in modern literature.

The unity of knowledge has long been a goal of Catholic universities and, until secularism rose to dominance in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, of most universities. So has the assumption that faith and reason are inseparable partners. These assumptions no longer hold in large swathes of the academy today. There are many causes for this—historical, philosophical, and cultural—but Kant’s understanding of the incompatibility of reason and revelation, as represented in his opposing concepts of autonomy and heteronomy, are a useful starting point. Kant perhaps best articulated the Enlightenment conception of rational, scientific knowing in his Critique of Pure Reason.

This domain [human understanding] is an island, enclosed by nature itself within unalterable limits. It is the land of truth—enchanting name!—surrounded by a wide and stormy ocean, the native home of illusion, where many a fog bank and many a swiftly melting iceberg give the deceptive appearance of farther shores, deluding the adventurous seafarer ever anew with empty hopes, and engaging him in enterprises which he can never abandon and yet is unable to carry to completion. Before we venture on this sea, to
explore it in all directions and to obtain assurance whether there be any ground for such hopes, it will be well to begin by casting a glance upon the map of the land which we are about to leave, and to enquire, first, whether we cannot in any case be satisfied with what it contains—are not, indeed, under compulsion to be satisfied, inasmuch as there may be no other territory upon which we can settle.1

As for Kant, so for secular, rational thinking today: academic inquiry must remain on the island of the finite world and of secular, rational discourse. Venturing out is not a legitimate activity and is to be excluded from the academy. Kant’s island can serve as a metaphor for modern academic disciplines. The human mind is limited to studying the phenomenal world, beyond which there is nothing knowable. Only what is available to the human reason can be considered true knowledge; religious knowledge is outside the scope of human reason and therefore not accessible.

In spite of these developments, integrated learning remains the ideal, if not the reality, in many Catholic institutions, as it was for John Henry Newman. In an 1856 sermon preached at the Catholic University of Ireland, Newman says that the various human faculties (intellectual, moral, spiritual, and emotional) were, in the beginning, “blended together” by God and made to “conspire into one whole, and act in common toward one end.” Human sinfulness sunders their integrity. The consequent separation of faculties within each individual has its counterpart in the external world, where each faculty is served by a separate institution. The university is the institution that serves the intellectual faculty. Newman would have his hearers recognize how detrimental this situation is for the health of our souls. Moreover, “what makes [this situation] worse is, that these various faculties and powers of mind have so long been separated from each other . . . that it comes to be taken for granted that they cannot be united.”2 The reason the Church creates Catholic universities, says Newman, is “to reunite things which were in the
beginning joined together by God [i.e., the intellectual, spiritual, and moral], and have been put asunder by man.” He then gives us his ideal.

I wish the intellect to range with the utmost freedom, and religion to enjoy an equal freedom; but what I am stipulating for is, that they should be found in one and the same place, and exemplified in the same persons. I want to destroy that diversity of centers, which puts everything into confusion by creating a contrariety of influences. I wish the same spots and the same individuals to be at once oracles of philosophy and shrines of devotion. It will not satisfy me, what satisfies so many, to have two independent systems, intellectual and religious, going at once side by side, by a sort of division of labour, and only accidentally brought together. It will not satisfy me, if religion is here, and science there, and young men converse with science all day, and lodge with religion in the evening. It is not touching the evil, to which these remarks have been directed, if young men eat and drink and sleep in one place, and think in another: I want the same roof to contain both the intellectual and moral discipline.

Newman was not responding specifically to Kant, but to the general philosophical currents of his day. Over a century later, the German theologian Karl Rahner, using Kant’s island metaphor—and in explicit disagreement with Kant—maintained that everyone is called to explore beyond the island.

In the ultimate depths of his being man knows nothing more surely than that his knowledge, that is, what is called knowledge in everyday parlance, is only a small island in a vast sea that has not been traveled. It is a floating island, and it might be more familiar to us than the sea, but ultimately it is borne by the sea . . . Hence the existentiell question for the knower is this: Which does he love more, the small island of his so-called knowledge or the sea of infinite mystery? Is the little light with which he illuminates this island—we call it science and scholarship—to be an eternal light which will shine forever for him? That would surely be hell.

Christopher Schiavone summarizes the difference between Kant and Rahner: “For Rahner, to be rational is to acknowledge that the limits of all those finite particulars found on the island, as well as of the island itself, are only known in relation to the unlimited depth and breadth of the sea.” The Lutheran theologian Paul Tillich maintained that Kant confined modern
thought to a “prison of finitude,” to what Rahner might have called a “hellish island” where truth, goodness, and beauty are caged in a phenomenal world devoid of transcendence.

In *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, John Paul II states that a “Catholic University is distinguished by its free search for the whole truth about nature, man, and God.” It is dedicated to the research of all aspects of truth in the essential connection with the supreme Truth, who is God.” No one serious about Catholic higher education would dispute the centrality of this statement, yet, coming to terms with a powerful, secular academic culture remains problematic for most Catholic and other religious colleges and universities. While the paper focuses on specific case histories from the United States, I believe they reflect similar developments in much of the West.

The goal of this paper is to discuss and debate understandings of academic freedom for the 21st century that build on, yet complete the prevailing secular principle. The secular principle is not so much wrong as it is incomplete, an incompleteness that leads to shortcomings in the practice of it, specifically, the failure to guarantee scholars the freedom to pursue connections between knowledge gained in academic disciplines and theological insight. By theological insight I do not mean pronouncements by religious authorities, adherence to dogmas, or to literal interpretations of religious texts that must be accepted without critical assessment; instead, I mean a subtle spiritual awareness that there is a surplus of knowledge and meaning to reality that transcends what can be known through ordinary disciplinary methods of inquiry; that findings in many fields of study hint at connections to a greater whole; and that scholars in any academic field must be free to pursue those connections.

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Academic freedom is generally acknowledged in the West as a principal foundation of higher education and as the *sine qua non* of a mature university. At the Second Vatican Council, the Church’s Magisterium acknowledged the legitimate autonomy of culture and insisted that the unique methods and techniques of the sciences must be respected as long as they are consonant with moral norms and the common good.  

Most academics can agree, though, that the principles of academic freedom and the confessional commitments of religiously affiliated universities do not always mix well. Tensions go back centuries and continue today. American scholars in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries forged principles of academic freedom during a period characterized by acrimony and mutual hostility between the secular sciences and religious authoritarianism. Most of the principal advocates for academic freedom in the early twentieth century were secular humanists, some with a strong antipathy toward religion—an antipathy matched with equal vigor by authorities in religious colleges and universities, who considered academic freedom to be little more than a “false liberty leading to license” and “a pretext to teach [false philosophical] systems which destroy all freedom.” Although discord continues today, the antagonism is not nearly as broad-based as in the past. Fortunately, acceptance of intellectual and academic freedom has advanced significantly during the past half century, and most, if not all, religiously affiliated universities now adhere to principles of academic freedom and tenure, even if uneasily at times.  

The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council admitted that the Church has not always greeted novel scholarly findings with enthusiasm. They even acknowledged that many scholars feared that “a closer bond between human activity and religion will work against the independence of . . . the sciences.” During the Council, the Catholic Church’s leadership
changed course. Let me cite section 36 of *Gaudium et Spes* (or, "The Church in the Modern World") in some detail. [Draw on ECC as in ACCU presentation]

If by the autonomy of earthly affairs we mean that created things and societies themselves enjoy their own laws and values which must be gradually deciphered, put to use, and regulated by human beings, then it is entirely right to demand that autonomy. . . . For by the very circumstance of their having been created, all things are endowed with their own stability, truth, . . . proper laws, and order. Humans must respect these as *they isolate them by the appropriate methods of the individual sciences or arts*. Therefore if methodical investigation within every branch of learning is carried out in a genuinely scientific manner and in accord with moral norms, it never truly conflicts with faith, for earthly matters and the concerns of faith derive from the same God. Indeed, whoever labors to penetrate the secrets of reality with a humble and steady mind, even though he or she is unaware of the fact, is nevertheless being led by the hand of God. . . Consequently, we cannot but deplore certain habits of mind, which are sometimes found among Christians, which do not sufficiently attend to the rightful independence of science and which, from the arguments and controversies they spark, lead many minds to conclude that faith and science are mutually opposed.12

While acknowledging flaws within the Christian community, the Council Fathers also cautioned against the agnosticism fostered by many of the sciences when their methods of investigation are “wrongly considered as the supreme rule of seeking the whole
truth.” Further, they recognized that “by virtue of their methods these sciences cannot penetrate to the intimate notion of things.” Because of the limitations inherent in the sciences, there is a need to “harmonize the proliferation of particular branches of study with the necessity of forming a synthesis of them, and of preserving among men the faculties of contemplation and observation which lead to wisdom.” The search for integration, then, must involve a continuous interaction among academic disciplines, including, I argue, philosophy and theology. Finally *Gaudium et Spes* goes on to say:

If the expression, “the independence of temporal affairs,” is taken to mean that created things do not depend on God, and that humans can use them without any reference to their Creator, anyone who acknowledges God will see how false such a meaning is. For without the Creator the creature would disappear. For their part, however, all believers of whatever religion *always hear God’s revealing voice in the discourse of creatures.*

Consider that last sentence: God’s revealing voice can be heard in the *discourse of creatures.* Creation—the natural world—reveals something of the sacred. Catholic thought, if not all Christian thought, has traditionally recognized “two books of God”: Scripture, or Revelation, and Nature. Both point to and reveal a reality beyond themselves. So it’s no wonder some mathematicians and scientists have said their research findings help disclose something of the mind of God. I’ll come back to that point later.

The Council acknowledges the necessary autonomy of the scholar as an element of academic freedom; but it also insists on the freedom to listen for the divine voice in the discourse of creation, and to pursue the connections between knowledge in various
academic disciplines and theological insight. By “theological insight” I do not here mean pronouncements by religious authorities; nor do I mean adherence to literal interpretations of religious texts that must be accepted without critical assessment; instead, I mean this: a subtle awareness that there is a surplus of knowledge and meaning to reality that transcends what can be known through ordinary disciplinary methods of inquiry—that findings in many fields of study hint at connections to a greater whole, and that these connections should be pursued. That is a general understanding of theological insight, not a strictly theological one, but it’s an important first step in anticipation of a deeper engagement with the Catholic theological tradition.

Not all scholars experience such awareness, of course, and not even those who do have the obligation to pursue the connections between their discipline and theological insight. In fact, most scholars will not, but everyone—no matter what their academic field—should be free to do so, and that freedom should be enshrined in the policies of every religiously affiliated university. Moreover, Catholic universities should hire some highly qualified scholars in each discipline who do want to pursue those connections. In proposing this, I’m offering a critique of our customary understanding of academic freedom because our understanding of it is incomplete. This incompleteness leads to shortcomings in the practice of it, in both religiously affiliated and secular institutions.

I’ll make my case in three steps: (1) I’ll examine sectarian obstacles—both religious and secular—to academic freedom; (2) I’ll show why academic freedom is not always as freeing in practice as the ideal of it suggests; and (3) I’ll propose a theological understanding of academic freedom that not only builds on and incorporates existing principles but also completes them, leading to a fuller understanding for the twenty-first century.

Before I do that, though, let me clarify two matters. First, the approach to academic freedom this volume will address. Whenever the concept of academic freedom arises in
religiously affiliated universities, what normally comes to the reader’s mind is the issue of whether or not scholars, especially theologians, have the freedom to dissent from religious orthodoxy, or at least to present heterodox positions. This essay does not concern itself with that topic. Rather, it focuses on whether all scholars should have the freedom to transcend secular disciplinary orthodoxies and move toward theological insight. No other volume has undertaken this approach, even though there has been a spate of books published during the past decade claiming to examine academic freedom anew.¹⁴ With the exception of Kenneth Garcia’s Academic Freedom and the Telos of the Catholic University (2012),¹⁵ none of them challenges the prevailing secular understanding of academic freedom with a theological perspective that enhances the secular. Indeed, the few references to religion in most of these books repeat conventional stereotypes from the past: the regrettable cases of Giordano Bruno and Galileo, for example; or from the present, such as the case of Creation Science. While those examples demonstrate the very real danger a rigid religious orthodoxy poses to academic freedom, they fail to take into account more subtle and sophisticated understandings of religion’s role in the academy.

Second, let me explain what I mean by the unusual phrase “transcending orthodoxies.” The word orthodoxy is normally used to mean traditional religious doctrines to which adherents of a faith tradition must assent. It means correct teaching and right thinking about certain things. That’s a legitimate meaning, of course, but there can also be what I will call orthodoxy with a lowercase “o” that runs contrary to the “upper case” Orthodoxy that it claims to champion. For example, in the 19th and early 20th centuries, a form of Neo-Scholastic theology and philosophy gained dominance within Catholic intellectual circles, universities, and the Church hierarchy, to the near suppression of other legitimate schools of thought within the Catholic theological
tradition. This Neo-Scholasticism purported to be based on the thought of Thomas Aquinas, but in reality it was a narrow interpretation of some aspects of Thomas’s thought, and an even narrower understanding of what Yves Congar called the Great Tradition of Christian philosophy, theology, and spirituality. By suppressing much of the Great Tradition, it became a lowercase “orthodoxy,” posing as the uppercase orthodoxy of the Great Tradition.

Lowercase orthodoxies are not exclusive to Catholic or Christian thought. They can characterize any ideology, whether religious or secular. There are all kinds of lowercase orthodoxies—secular, postmodern, Marxist, materialistic—that attempt to become uppercase Orthodoxies and to suppress rival ways of thinking and understanding. That’s what I mean by orthodoxies in this volume and I will discuss whether the principle of academic freedom should enable us to transcend them.

Let me now point to a very useful definition of academic freedom, and then discuss how lowercase orthodoxies impinge on it. The American Association of University Professors (the AAUP), in its 1915 General Report of the Committee on Academic Freedom and Tenure, claims that academic freedom is the freedom of scholars to teach, to conduct research, and to present the results thereof, in the following words: “Scholars must be absolutely free not only to pursue their investigations but to declare the results of their researches, no matter where they may lead or to what extent they may come into conflict with accepted opinion.” Very useful, indeed, but it is incomplete. To this statement I would add—along with Pope John Paul II in Ex Corde Ecclesiae—“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” (ECE 12). Moreover, the research must be conducted within the framework of moral norms.
This attempted definition of academic freedom is germane because knowledge discovered through free inquiry is sometimes unsettling: in some cases to ecclesiastical authorities and religious believers; in other cases to political and governmental authorities; and sometimes to business interests. And, I must add, it is sometimes unsettling to secular academic ideologues. After all, that which constitutes “accepted opinion,”—based on certain philosophical and ideological assumptions, whether explicit or implicit—changes over time, for good or ill. What was once deemed contrary to accepted opinion may later become the new conventional wisdom, a new orthodoxy. Then we may have the situation where adherents of a new status quo attempt to silence or censor dissidents from their own orthodoxies. The practice of academic freedom, while still lauded in theory, shrinks, and may actually prohibit the full pursuit of truth in a good many cases—and this can negatively impact a scholar’s freedom to roam into the fields of religion and theology.

Professional standards are established within the framework of specific academic disciplines, and for the most part, that is as it should be. Scholars must keep abreast of current trends in their fields if they are to further advance knowledge and pass it on to both their colleagues and their students. Yet the meaning of academic freedom was once more capacious than it is today, understood as the freedom to pursue knowledge beyond one’s field of studies within a philosophical or even theological context. The German research universities of the late 18th and early 19th centuries—the home of modern notions of academic freedom—insisted that scholars connect knowledge in individual fields of study to the whole of knowledge. The concept of academic freedom first gained institutional recognition with the creation, in 1810, of the University of Berlin, considered by many to be the first modern research university. The twin concepts of *Lehrfreiheit* and *Lernfreiheit* (the freedom to teach and the freedom to learn) formed
the basis for the German understanding of academic freedom, and German professors came to insist on that freedom as a right. They also insisted on the right of the scholar to inquire into areas *beyond* his or her specialization; in fact, it was expected that most scholars would be willing to explore how the finite realm encompassed by their field was related to the infinite, or Absolute, that is, within a philosophical or theological horizon. The right to pursue the whole of knowledge was an essential aspect of academic freedom.18

Unfortunately, the pursuit of the unity of knowledge became increasingly attenuated in German universities, even though scholars such as Karl Jaspers (*The Idea of the University*, 1959) attempted to revive that tradition, and even though academic freedom is enshrined in the German Constitution. Unfortunately, it is a secularized version of academic freedom that is enshrined. Today, the German academy suffers from the same hyper-specialization and curricular fragmentation as do American universities.

The remainder of this essay will focus on developments in American universities. I will now proceed to my three steps.

**Step 1: Sectarian Obstacles to Academic Freedom**

I will discuss two kinds of sectarian obstacles. The first is religious, the kind that usually comes to mind. Religious groups often believe their viewpoint is *the* correct one and many believers too readily dismiss other perspectives. They are sometimes characterized by closed-mindedness, censorship, and exclusivity. In fact, in American jurisprudence, the word *sectarian* is nearly synonymous with the word “religious” and is considered the opposite of “secular.” This linkage of sectarianism to religion came to have its pejorative connotation for perhaps justifiable reasons. Religious strife had been a cause of war and division in Europe for centuries. In a
pluralistic society such as that of the United States, with no established religion, sectarian efforts to condemn and exclude the conceptions of others—including scientists, nonbelievers, and believers from other denominations—created discord. Both Catholics and Protestants were guilty of this throughout the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century. Because of this association, the US legal system tends to consider religion and sectarianism as synonymous. There’s no need to go into detail here because we’re all familiar with religious sectarianism. For too long it has been detrimental to scholarship as a whole and to the relationship between theology and other academic disciplines. We can only hope for a reconciliation.

The second form of sectarianism is what I call secular sectarianism. The term may sound counterintuitive, so let me explain what I am and am not claiming. I am not claiming that secular disciplinary methodologies necessarily constitute instances of sectarianism. Nor do I assert that secularism itself represents a form of sectarianism. Let me clarify this by progressing carefully through several steps.

First, secular disciplinary methodologies. Most disciplinary methods are focused inquiries into particular domains of finite reality, whether at the molecular, biological, social, or cosmic scale, without reference to any religious beliefs. As noted earlier in a passage from Gaudium et Spes, scholars isolate particular aspects of reality from the whole of it in order to better study them. Most scholars, even religious ones, bracket religious concerns in order to focus on a particular subject matter, on a particular problem within a defined domain of reality. Such methodologies are legitimate and necessary. They have led to countless discoveries that reveal the beauty and intricacy of the universe, to medical and technological advances, and to our understanding of human psychology and society. However, sometimes the appropriate bracketing of religion strays from a legitimate scientific method to philosophical presuppositions
not justified by science itself. Such is the case, for example, with philosophical naturalism and scientific materialism. For example, if a scientist says, “There is no divine reality, everything is reducible to matter,” then he or she has left the domain of science and entered the realm of philosophy or metaphysics, because science itself cannot tell us whether there is, or is not, a God. This brings us to the second stage: secularism, which is a naturalistic or materialistic philosophy that claims there is no reality beyond what can be known through rational inquiry. Secularism, though an ideology, is a rational philosophical belief, though not a valid scientific one. Rational belief in spiritual reality does not come easily to many, and scholars sometimes settle into agnostic or even atheistic positions. This alone does not make them sectarian. Many secular scholars are open-minded and tolerant of competing worldviews, including religious ones—they just aren’t believers—and they make valuable contributions to scholarship and to our cultural and intellectual life.

Some scholars, however, move beyond secularism to what I call secular sectarianism—a closed-minded, intolerant stance that refuses to consider theological or spiritual ways of knowing as valid or admissible within the academy. Secular sectarians reject the possibility of religious reality outright. They deem religious knowledge and faith as nonsense, delusional, or in the case of scientists such as Richard Dawkins, evil. Dawkins says the following: “I think a case can be made that faith is one of the world’s great evils . . . comparable to the smallpox virus but harder to eradicate.”¹⁹ Such statements are no more helpful for a fruitful dialogue between theology and other academic disciplines than are the efforts of “Creation Scientists.” Dawkins’s views are shared by many secularists, so much so that secular universities have become increasingly sectarian in the sense of being doctrinaire concerning reigning ideologies, often intolerant of those who dissent from scientific and progressive orthodoxies, and dismissive of religious
perspectives. A scientist, a postmodernist, or a secular humanist can be as narrowly sectarian in his or her views, and in what ideas he or she attempts to exclude, as any religious fundamentalist. Dissent from secular orthodoxies is especially dangerous for untenured scholars. And is it not a shame that scientific and ideological orthodoxies are not open enough to entertain well-grounded philosophical and theological theories that challenge often-unacknowledged disciplinary assumptions? Do such lowercase orthodoxies not in fact mirror the authoritarianism and closed-mindedness of the worst religious dogmatists?

Step 2: The Constricting of Academic Freedom in America

Throughout most of the nineteenth century, scholars had the freedom to roam the various fields of knowledge, adopt scholarly methods from any of them, and conduct research across disciplines as they wished. Unfortunately, as historians Jon Roberts and James Turner have shown, this freedom to roam widely began slowly to disappear in the late nineteenth century. Scholars with broad, interdisciplinary interests and backgrounds—Charles Darwin was among them—were eventually replaced by a younger generation of disciplinary specialists in the latter half of the century. These younger scholars began to raise barriers between disciplines. The unity of knowledge began to be divided into separate territories. Previously, say Roberts and Turner, specialization “neither limited authority over [a] subject to a distinctive cadre of methodologically acculturated experts nor restricted a scholar from pursuing very different subjects.” In the hands of the new specialists, however, “scholarly competence required restricting oneself to one’s ‘discipline.’”

Specialization has many benefits, of course, and we reap them daily; but it also has the negative effect of narrowing the realm in which a scholar may inquire. Freedom to inquire within
disciplinary boundaries—free of interference—gradually became an unwritten taboo against inquiry beyond them—against connecting one’s field with the whole of reality. On the one hand, this displayed a desirable intellectual modesty—a recognition of the limits of one’s knowledge. On the other hand, the constriction became a means of hindering, or at least delaying, scholars’ natural desire to move beyond their area of competence into other fields of study. To follow one’s broad intellectual desire could very well cut short an academic career, jeopardizing one’s chances of gaining tenure or further promotion. Many young scholars today are painfully aware of these unwritten taboos that curtail their freedom. I believe such freedom is especially briddled if one wishes to engage knowledge in their field with theological insight.

This gradual constriction is mirrored in the historical development of the concept of academic freedom in the United States. And here we can go to the AAUP’s own statements, as well as to other influential advocates of academic freedom, for evidence.

As I noted earlier, the AAUP issued its first “General Report” on academic freedom in 1915, declaring the scholar free to pursue investigations “no matter where they may lead or to what extent they may come into conflict with accepted opinion.” The report recognizes the need for research in understanding the natural world (through natural science), the human world (through social science), and “ultimate realities and values” (through philosophy and religion). It goes on to say, “In the spiritual life, and in the interpretation of the general meaning and ends of human existence and its relation to the universe, we are still far from a comprehension of the final truths, and from a universal agreement among all sincere and earnest men. In all of these domains of knowledge, the first condition of progress is complete and unlimited freedom to pursue inquiry and publish its results.” The committee report then describes the vital function
that natural and social scientists perform, but does not follow up on its statement about the freedom to pursue spiritual truth or “ultimate realities.” It just leaves that claim hanging there.

Twenty-five years later, in 1940, the AAUP issued its Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure, which is still the basic guideline in force today. Tellingly, it omits entirely that dangling reference to the pursuit of spiritual truth. Moreover—and more importantly—that key phrase from the 1915 statement, “no matter where [the scholar’s researches] may lead . . . or to what extent they may come into conflict with accepted opinion,” is absent. Now, why was such a near perfect definition of academic freedom dropped? I believe the AAUP should reintroduce it, especially given the narrowing concept that I’m about to describe of what constitutes “truth.”

The work of Columbia University historian Robert MacIver, who headed up the American Academic Freedom Project in the 1950s, illustrates a further constriction of academic freedom. MacIver said that the scholar was free to learn for its own sake, to seek truth. But truth, for him, was narrow. A statement was true when it was “in accord with the facts,” with the way things can be shown actually to be using methods of scientific and rational inquiry. The scholar observed the phenomena, gathered data, and applied the “logic of evidence” using his or her own ingenuity and reason. \(^{24}\) Truth derived from spiritual or theological insight did not constitute this kind of knowledge, in MacIver’s view, and therefore was to be discounted in the academy. Truth, he wrote, “is relevant only to knowledge that depends on investigation, that can always be questioned and retested, and that is never accepted on the ground that it is the deliverance of any authority, human or divine.” \(^{25}\) Theological insight, then, became an “invasion” of this realm of scientific investigation and was always understood as some “deliverance” accepted blindly without critical thinking, without assessment of facts and experience, and always came from
some “outside authority,” never as an interior awareness of something that transcends disciplinary knowledge. For MacIver, science is the only valid stream leading to truth, not one of several streams that eventually flow into a great sea of wisdom. As much value as there is in what McIver says—and there is much—there are strong, secular philosophical assumptions underlying his viewpoint—assumptions about the nature of reality that are not unquestionable. In fact, the committee McIver assembled to advise him was made up almost entirely of secular scholars; one of the exceptions was John Courtney Murray, S.J. Murray, however, strenuously objected to McIver’s narrow understanding of truth, so much so that he eventually resigned from the advisory committee, convinced that a secular outlook was cooked into the report.26

And so, academic freedom was gradually whittled down to research within one’s “field of competence”27 In the U.S. most scholars outside of theology departments would be especially discouraged from drawing on theological insight to inform their discipline, especially if such insight came “into conflict with accepted opinion” of lowercase disciplinary orthodoxies.

Secularists have, to a large extent, captured the academic disciplines—often even in religiously affiliated universities—and it is their conventional orthodoxy that reigns, and they are not disposed to give ground to alternative or rival viewpoints. They have won the battle, so to speak, and aren’t about to relinquish their hold over the curriculum or hiring of faculty.

In fairness, religious obscurantism from all Christian denominations played a significant role in these developments. As I noted earlier, principles of academic freedom were forged in an atmosphere of mutual hostility between the secular sciences and religious authority. When scientists and secular scholars during the early 20th century saw the banning of certain books and the knee-jerk condemnation of novel scientific and philosophical theories,28 it was
understandable that they would retreat from any engagement with religious thought, withdraw into their own scholarly domains, and even declare, as did the late Steven Jay Gould, that science and theology comprise “non-overlapping magisterial authorities,” each with its own separate turf. The recent rise of Creation Science and the Intelligent Design movement have not helped overcome antipathies.

I realize this brief historical outline is much too skeletal and stark—the reality was far more complex. Many scholars in Catholic colleges prior to the Second Vatican Council carried out their scholarship freely, and there are some scholars today who find ways of incorporating theological insight into their teaching, in spite of disciplinary norms that frown upon it. Moreover, disciplinary boundaries today are beginning to be broken down, little by little, and there is far more interdisciplinary work going on, even though it tends to occur in extradisciplinary centers and extracurricular programs. There is even movement among some academics toward an understanding that religious ways of thinking need to be included in the curriculum. Some poets and writers, for example, are beginning to articulate a new sense of religious awareness—Fanny Howe, Mary Szybist, Christian Wiman, and Marilynne Robinson are a few examples—and some literary scholars are taking notice. Biologists and social scientists have worked with theologians and philosophers on issues of common concern, such as global climate change. Many of these efforts are in their infancy and still amorphous, but they are beginning. We do not yet know where they will go, but we should encourage them. We can only hope that the old mutual hostility and indifference between theology and other academic disciplines can be reconciled through dialogue and mutual cooperation on societal problems. Disciplinary boundaries will remain intact—and should—though perhaps they will become a bit more permeable. Which brings me to step three.
Step 3: A Theological Understanding of Academic Freedom

Here I offer a theological understanding of academic freedom that builds on and completes existing principles. Religiously affiliated universities should incorporate the best of current secular standards, yet should ground them in the theological principle of the mind’s desire for God and the desire to understand all things in the finite realm in relation to an infinite horizon.

In *The Idea of a University*, John Henry Newman wrote the following:

> All knowledge forms one whole, because its subject matter is one; the universe in its length and breadth is so intimately knit together, that we cannot separate off portion from portion, and operation from operation, except by a mental abstraction; and then again, as to its Creator, though He of course in His own Being is infinitely separate from it. . . . yet He has so implicated Himself with it[,] . . . by His presence in it[,] . . . His impressions upon it, and His influences through it, that we cannot truly or fully contemplate it without in some main aspects contemplating Him.33

“God” says Michael Buckley, “is the *direction toward which wonder progresses*.”34 Any topic, if pursued long and deeply enough, eventually leads to philosophical and theological questions that cannot be answered from within the limits of any particular science. Albert Einstein, for example, an agnostic who rejected the belief systems of all organized religions, also considered himself a deeply religious man in that he recognized a mysterious force within nature that cannot be grasped even by an understanding of the fundamental laws of physics.35 He wrote, “You will
hardly find one among the profounder sort of scientific minds without a peculiar religious
feeling. . . . His religious feeling takes the form of a rapturous amazement at the harmony of
natural law, which reveals an intelligence of such superiority that, compared with it, all the
systematic thinking and acting of human beings is an utterly insignificant reflection.”36 Further,
he wrote, “The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious . . . To know that what
is impenetrable to us really exists, manifesting itself as the highest wisdom and the most radiant
beauty which our dull faculties can comprehend in their most primitive forms—this knowledge,
this feeling, is at the center of true religiousness.”37 Einstein also believed that there is a deep
consonance and harmony between science and religion. “Science without religion,” said
Einstein, “is lame; religion, without science, is blind.”38

The British poet Percy Bysshe Shelley considered himself an atheist but nonetheless
wrote, “The awful shadow of some Unseen Power / Floats though unseen among us.”39 One
could cite many such inklings of the sacred among nonbelievers, and intimations like this bring
scholars to the threshold of theology—to a place where science and theology, literary studies and
theology, social science and theology, can meet and have a dialogue. Let’s give them the
freedom and space to do that, freed of the shackles of lowercase orthodoxies—religious and
secular. The mission of a religiously affiliated university is to provide a haven for the mind to
pursue truth wherever it may lead and in whatever academic discipline the scholar resides. If that
pursuit calls one to limit his or her research to a finite aspect of reality, then that must be
protected. And, the university must also protect those who do want to pursue knowledge beyond
their disciplines to the theological realm.

Two examples—one from the social and another from the natural sciences—may help
clarify how this might be done.
The Social Sciences

In *Transcendence: Critical Realism and God*, sociologist Margaret Archer, says that the social sciences, “throughout their history . . . have privileged atheism,” that they have presented atheism as an “epistemologically neutral position, instead of what it is, a commitment to a belief in the absence of religious phenomena.”40 Atheism, skepticism, and relativism, then, possess a discursive privilege in the academy. Social science methods must, of course, bracket religion and focus on social phenomena in isolation from other aspects of reality. But to transform a legitimate methodological bracketing into a philosophical position that concludes there is no reality outside the social sphere, Archer says, is to “render it impossible from the start to understand either science or religion as anything other than a social construction. The social is the only token on the board.”41 That has implications for the academic freedom of social scientists who would like to have additional tokens, including ones derived from theological insight, on the table. Social scientists routinely make philosophical assumptions—whether explicitly or implicitly—about the nature of social reality. These assumptions derive from a number of sources: Marxism, neo-Kantianism, post-modernism, feminism, naturalism, and others. Is it not, therefore, legitimate to bring theological insight arising from religious traditions to the table in a way that does not violate the methodological distinctions of disciplines, even while challenging disciplinary orthodoxies? Theology does, after all, provide some rationally considered and reasoned principles concerning the common good, social justice and poverty, the fair and ethical distribution of wealth, the theological foundation of communitarian life, and the dignity of each human being. I claim not only that it is legitimate for academic social scientists in religiously affiliated universities to bring these tokens to the table, but also that the principle of
academic freedom should ensure their right to do so. Moreover, social science students have the right to know the content of these additional tokens and how they may or may not relate to conventional social science content and methods.

**The Natural Sciences**

Science, as I have noted, is rooted in wonder—wonder at the marvelous intricacy of the natural world, of its beauty, of how it works, and how it came to be. Physicist Paul Davies notes that the universe is so extraordinarily fine-tuned that it seems to have been constructed so as to bring about life, and not only life, but *intelligent* life. If the physical constants governing the early universe had been infinitesimally different, the universe we know could not have emerged. Stephen Hawking says that “if the rate of expansion one second after the Big Bang had been smaller by even one part in a hundred thousand million million, the universe would have recollapsed before life could have formed.” On the other hand, adds Ian Barbour, if the rate of expansion had been “greater by one part in a million, the universe would have expanded too rapidly for stars and planets to form.” Moreover, if the strong nuclear force had been ever so slightly weaker or stronger, “stable stars and compounds such as water” or elements such as carbon could not have formed. The simultaneous occurrence of so many independent and unlikely cosmic coincidences appears “wildly improbable,” says Barbour, leading some astrophysicists to see evidence of design in the early universe, of a master mind ordering the cosmos. Theoretical physicist Freeman Dyson of the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton concludes “from the existence of these findings from physics and astronomy that the universe is an unexpectedly hospitable place for living creatures . . . Being a scientist” he says, “I do not claim that the architecture of the universe proves the existence of God. I claim only that the
architecture of the universe is consistent with the hypothesis that mind plays an essential role in its functioning.” Dyson also writes, “to worship God means to recognize that mind and intelligence are woven into the fabric of our universe in a way that altogether surpasses our comprehension.” Dyson is correct that the scientific evidence does not prove the existence of God, let alone the truths of any particular religion; but it certainly is suggestive—and indeed consistent with basic claims about the intelligible createdness of the natural world as found in multiple religious traditions.

And yet, scientific materialists strenuously reject the possibility of design. The very word “design” invokes what Paul Davies calls the “T-word”: teleology, the principle that nature tends toward certain ends, and thus is designed. Teleology is anathema for most scientists; reductive, scientific materialism is the only token allowed on the table, even though some scientists implicitly assume a directionality, a teleology, in the natural laws of the universe. Take, for example, the search for extraterrestrial intelligence, funded by NASA and other advanced scientific institutions. This search is based on the assumption that life is not a fluke—that given a planet with a sufficiently stable geology, the right chemical elements, and the right distance from a star, life will not only emerge but will evolve toward ever-increasing sentience until intelligent beings appear. What is this assumption but an implicit nod to teleology, a belief that nature tends toward certain ends and will, given the right conditions, attain them?

The British astrophysicist, Fred Hoyle, once an atheist who resisted the Big Bang theory of the beginning of the universe—and resisted it in part because he recognized its theistic implications—eventually came to admit the role of intelligence in designing the cosmos. He says, "A common sense interpretation of the facts suggests that a superintelligence has monkeyed with physics, as well as with chemistry and biology, and that there are no blind forces worth
speaking about in nature. . . The facts seem to me so overwhelming as to put this conclusion almost beyond question.”52

One can find many similar citations from scientists, including Nobel Prize winners, many of them not religious believers in the conventional sense.

And here’s what I find so fascinating and telling: all these eminent scientists did not come to their conclusions because it was the deliverance of some outside religious authority; nor did a hallowed religious text tell them it was so. Rather, it was their own and their peers’ scientific research findings that led them to boundary questions between science and theology, where they beheld a great mystery that they call, variously: Super-Intellect; Highest Wisdom; Unseen Power; Most Radiant Beauty; God (words that resonate with language from the world’s great religious traditions when authors try to describe the ineffable). In other words, these scientists listened attentively to the discourse of creatures, to the discourse of the natural world, which reveals its inner secrets, and also points to and reveals something beyond itself.

Given that, shouldn’t scholars in all fields of study have the freedom to follow where that mystery leads them, well beyond the boundaries of their particular field, toward theological insight? And if scientists cannot pursue their research and teach in ways that include theological insights, would that not be a restriction on their academic freedom?

There are, of course, some prominent scientists, though not many, who do debate these topics. I suspect that very few, if any, do so before gaining tenure, and that these topics are seldom raised in science classrooms—which brings us to the academic freedom and rights of students.

Should students have the right to know and understand the nature of boundary questions between science and theology; social science and theology; literature and theology, and to pursue
questions further, and make up their own minds? If not, why not? If yes, how can a dialogue between the various disciplines and theological insight best be carried out in a way that does not violate the methodological distinctions among disciplines, even while challenging the sometimes unacknowledged philosophical assumptions behind disciplinary orthodoxies?

In conclusion, as we proceed in this still young century, let’s consider how the concept and practice of academic freedom might evolve. I’d like to see religiously affiliated colleges and universities develop their own understanding of what academic freedom is, and shape hiring, promotion, and tenure policies with those in mind—an understanding that adopts the good elements of secular understanding, but which also arises from a vision of the human being as made in the image and likeness of God, of having an eros for understanding all things in relation to God, of the scholar who finds research and adoration to be inseparable twins.

No academic discipline is complete in itself; each explores only a portion of reality. Scholars from all disciplines should integrate their wisdom, listen to each other’s perspectives, and do so collegially. Let us therefore take a new look at what academic freedom would mean if orthodoxies of all kind are set aside and theologians, philosophers, and scientists (both natural and social) became differentiated partners pursuing truth in its wholeness, rather than as rivals or strangers—an academic freedom that allows scholars to soar toward Shelley’s “Unseen Power” and Einstein’s “Highest Wisdom.”

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Notes

This essay is a modified version of the author’s essays in the September 2014 issue of The Journal of Academic Freedom, and Horizons: the Journal of the College Theology Society (Spring, 2011). Much of it has been re-printed in the Introduction to the author’s edited volume Reexamining Academic Freedom in Religiously Affiliated Universities (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), and some of the material draws on the author’s book, Academic Freedom and the Telos of the Catholic University (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).


3 Ibid., 12–13.

4 Ibid., 13.


6 Christopher F. Schiavone, Rationality and Revelation in Rahner: The Contemplative Dimension (New York: Peter Lang, 1994), 169, 170–71. I am indebted to Schiavone’s account of Rahner’s view on revelation and rationality.


Fairfield University, *Catalogue of the College of Arts and Sciences* 13, no. 1 (1959–60).

*Gaudium et Spes*, 36. Emphasis added.

Ibid. Emphasis added.


We see this phenomenon is American universities today when scholars with viewpoints that diverge from accepted progressive political orthodoxies are sometimes forbidden
to speak by angry mobs of students. See Peter Beinert, “A Violent Attack on Free Speech at Middlebury.” The Atlantic (March 6, 2017); and Howard Blume, “Protestors Disrupt Talk by Pro-Police Author, Sparking Free Speech Debate at Claremont McKenna College,” The Los Angeles Times (April 7, 2017).

18 K. Garcia, Academic Freedom, 35–64.


Courtney Murray Collection, Woodstock Theological Research Center, Georgetown University
(II F 305. 3 L).


28 Philip Gleason referred to this period in Catholic intellectual life as an “intellectual
reign of terror.” See Philip Gleason, Contending with Modernity: Catholic Higher Education in
the Twentieth Century (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 16.

29 Stephen Jay Gould, Rock of Ages: Science and Religion and the Fullness of Life (New

30 Douglas Jacobsen and Rhonda Hustedt Jacobsen, eds., The American University in a
Postsecular Age, OUP, 2008; Douglas and Rhonda Hustedt Jacobsen, No Longer Invisible:

31 Romana Huk, “A Single Liturgy: Fanny Howe’s The Wedding Dress,” Christianity and
Literature 58, no. 4 (Summer 2009): 657–93; Huk, “Poetry and Religion,” in A Concise
Companion to Postwar British and Irish Poetry, ed. Nigel Alderman and C. D. Blanton (Oxford,
UK: Blackwell, 2009), 221–42. See also recent issues of scholarly journals such as Religion and
Literature and Christianity and Literature, and literary journals such as Image: Art, Faith,
Mystery.

32 See, for example, http://climatechange.nd.edu/, accessed on May 10, 2013.

33 John Henry Newman, The Idea of a University (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre
Dame Press, 1982), 38.

34 Michael J. Buckley, At the Origins of Modern Atheism (Yale, 1987), 360. Emphasis
added.

36 Ibid., 267–68.


41 Ibid., 13.

42 Davies, *Cosmic Jackpot*, 3.


46 Ibid., 58. See also Davies, *Cosmic Jackpot*, 222–23.


Davies, *Cosmic Jackpot*, 233–39. I use the word *design* with some trepidation because of its connection in many a scientific mind with the modern intelligent design movement, a successor to creation science. However, I am using the word *design* in the way scientists sometimes use it, based on their own observations and the questions raised by their own findings.

For a careful discussion by an atheist philosopher on the need to incorporate the concept of teleology into theories of evolution, see Thomas Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist, Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature Is Almost Certainly False* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). Nagel’s modest little book has generated fierce criticism from scientific materialists and atheists, and praise from other quarters.


An even broader question is whether secular institutions might come to admit the indemonstrable character of commitments to naturalism and materialism, and expand their range of academic freedom; if and until they do so, there’s a case to be made that some religiously affiliated universities have *more* academic freedom than they do. Addressing that broader question is not the specific purpose of this volume, but it is worth keeping in mind.
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