

Calvin University

Calvin Digital Commons

University Faculty Publications

University Faculty Scholarship

8-1952

Academic Freedom At Calvin

Henry Stob

Calvin University

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.calvin.edu/calvin_facultypubs



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Stob, Henry, "Academic Freedom At Calvin" (1952). *University Faculty Publications*. 566.

https://digitalcommons.calvin.edu/calvin_facultypubs/566

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the University Faculty Scholarship at Calvin Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in University Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Calvin Digital Commons. For more information, please contact dbm9@calvin.edu.

Academic Freedom at Calvin

By HENRY STOB

EVERY one wants freedom. Business men want economic freedom. Citizens want political freedom. Believers want religious freedom. And teachers want academic freedom.

This is reasonable. Man has an essential dignity and a native claim to liberty. He was not meant to be a slave.

This the Christian knows and that is why he hates all tyranny. It is the reason for his opposition to political dictators, economic collectivisms, and coercive religious establishments. It also accounts for his resistance to monopolistic education and programs of thought control. It is the reason why he is a defender of academic freedom. He thinks all men should be free from arbitrary restraints, not only in government, business, and worship, but also in scholarship and learning.

Now Freedom is a Liberal shibboleth. It is not surprising, therefore, to find the Christian, who loves freedom, in at least apparent agreement on many practical issues with the secular liberals of the day. Like the latter he is apt to be an advocate of some form of democracy in government, of free though responsible enterprise in business, of liberty of conscience in religion, of freedom of expression in journalism, of civil liberties for men of every race and color in social polity, and of freedom of thought and inquiry in the schools. He is especially apt to be this if he is a Protestant and aware of the protestant tradition of liberty, criticism, and non-conformism. Like the Puritan of Macauley's *Essay on Milton* the typical protestant is a doughty champion of human freedoms, and thus in form at least a brother to the modern liberal.

It would be a mistake, however, to suppose that the Christian and the modern liberal are cut from the same cloth. Their agreements are only skin-deep. Both want freedom, but their definitions of freedom are different, and the difference is reflected in the character of their practical proposals. It is my purpose to indicate this by discussing one of the many freedoms both are

concerned to preserve — academic freedom in the schools.

* * *

THE question of academic freedom is currently a very live issue in American university circles. Educators are discussing it avidly. Many of them feel that under the pressures of the times this freedom is being lost or seriously curtailed. The forces of reaction, they think, are hampering free inquiry and action. As evidence they cite the dismissal of a number of faculty members from the staff of the University of Washington for communist party affiliation; they cite the action taken by the trustees of the University of California requiring a loyalty oath of staff members; they cite the rule recently invoked at Michigan State College forbidding faculty members to take active part in party politics; and they cite the insistence of Mr. Buckley in his popular book that the chair of Economics at Yale be returned to the defenders of the Capitalistic System.

All this, it is said, reveals that professors in our colleges are no longer free, or no longer as free as they ought to be. Whether this is actually so depends, of course, upon what one understands by academic freedom, and I propose to make an elementary analysis of that concept, not merely in order to estimate the weight and bearing of the evidence just cited, but also and primarily to determine whether there is, or ought to be, such a thing as academic freedom at Calvin College.

* * *

THE fact that it is *academic* freedom we are considering requires us to recall what an academic institution is concerned to do. It is necessary to observe what the specific areas are in which academic freedom is properly exercised.

It appears that these areas are two in number. There are at least two things that an academic institution is concerned to do. It is concerned to dis-

close truth, and it is concerned to publish truth. A college must be engaged in research, and it must teach. It must both investigate and disseminate.

These two functions are sometimes separated. The one is then assigned to the University and the other to the College. Expediency seems to require this. In reality, however, the two functions belong together, and they ought to be kept in the closest possible contact. A college such as our own, for example, even though it offers no advanced degrees and therefore cannot in strictness be called a university, must perform the university function of research as well as the college function of teaching. If Christian teaching is to be real there must be Christian scholarship beforehand. And if both are to be real there must be freedom — academic freedom: freedom of inquiry for the scholar and freedom of expression for the teacher.

But what are we to understand by *Freedom*?

* * *

THERE is in the notion of Freedom both a negative and a positive element. In current usage the negative element predominates and sometimes this negativity is erroneously regarded as exhausting the whole meaning of the term. This is a serious mistake. It remains true, however, that the term freedom does have an inalienable negative aspect. In this aspect freedom means *Freedom From*. It means Independence. It means immunity or exemption from something. It connotes absence of restraint, bondage, or subjection. It means to be loose from restrictions.

This negativity, far from being a negligible element in freedom, is the very essence of perfect or absolute freedom, such as is enjoyed by God. God is completely free. He is bound by nothing external to himself. He is in bondage to nothing. "His freedom consists in a supreme independence of all things apart from himself, a complete immunity from subjection or necessity of any kind, except the essential necessity of knowing and loving

himself in an eternal unchanging act that is identical with his nature" (David O'Connell).

Now man is created in the image of God, and because he bears the divine *image* he too has freedom, even freedom in the negative sense of Independence. But because he is *created*, his freedom is a creaturely freedom, his independence is a creaturely independence. The adjective "creaturely" is important. It modifies man's freedom. It means that human freedom can never be described simply as exemption from "undue" restraint.

This implies, of course, that there are "due" restraints upon him. They are upon him precisely because he is a creature and thus subject to God, to God's laws, and to all the ordinances of God. But it also implies that he is entitled to throw off "undue" restraints. He is entitled to do this precisely because he bears the image of God. Being superior to nature and on a plane with his fellows he may refuse to be victimized by the one or enslaved by the other.

It is this nice balance between liberty and restraint, freedom and subjection, that is the essence of the Christian conception of Liberty, and the very basis of genuine Democracy.

* * *

BECAUSE there is a nice and delicate balance here, it has not always been preserved. To many, freedom under law, liberty under restraint, independence within the framework of an ultimate dependence, high dignity while in creaturely subjection, has seemed grossly contradictory and quite intolerable.

The first to think it intolerable was Lucifer and by putting the thought into operation he became the Devil. The next to think so was Adam, and his acting on the principle was his Fall. He wished to be like God. In this context that means: he wished to be free, unqualifiedly free, exempt from any and all restrictions except those imposed by his own nature.

To the sinner, fallen in Adam, this desire has ever since seemed somehow right. Freedom, he thinks, is incompatible with commitment. Of course the view cannot be consistently maintained except on the basis of a radical

atheism. But very few men have gone so far as to deny that God exists; most men have simply fenced him in. To save his freedom man has restricted God; he has shorn him of his comprehensive and unqualified Lordship. The sinner, untouched by grace, puts God either in an uninfluential and non-determinative spectator role, as in Deism; or identifies him with the human spirit itself, as in Pantheism; or exempts from his rule and sovereignty some particular part of the human soul, as in Rationalism, where the intellect is declared autonomous, and religion and science, faith and reason, piety and learning, love and logic, Christianity and education, are thought incapable of combination.

* * *

IT is this latter view that comes to expression in the liberal tradition of modernity, a tradition which has its roots in renaissance humanism and its chief expression in secularistic scientism. It is this view that dominates contemporary discussions of academic freedom, and it is the bond of agreement even between disputants. What the so-called liberals are all agreed on is that academic freedom is freedom *from* — freedom from the apriori, freedom from assumptions, freedom from commitment, freedom from the dictation of religious faith, freedom from a sacred book, freedom from a dogmatic creed.

That they are generally agreed on this could be amply evidenced from the literature. Practical illustration of it is afforded by the events that transpired at the University of Washington. The president of that institution dismissed a number of prominent professors on the ground that they had Communist Party affiliations. When the news of the dismissals reached the campuses of the land, a great hue and cry went up. The action of the president was loudly denounced as a violation of academic freedom. A university, it was maintained, is a place where every voice must be heard. Education as such is uncommitted to any specific theory or position. It must remain free of entanglements with any economic, social, or religious view, and hospitable to all. The truth is at no point finally made out. To suppose that it were would be to hamper and

restrict free critical inquiry at precisely that point. One must maintain the open, indeterminate mind, and by that token keep a completely open door at College and University. Academic freedom demands this.

The president had to reply to his detractors, and it is interesting to note that though he differed from them in practice, he agreed with them in theory. "True," he said in effect, "a free scholar is an uncommitted scholar, a free school is one that owns no basic faith, a good teacher is one that has an open and undetermined mind on all fundamental questions. The great enemy of freedom is Faith, Dogma, Conviction, Commitment. That is why I fired the Communists. They are dogmatists, they are doctrinaire, and there is no room for such in a democratic institution."

That the president and his critics differ in practical policy is at this juncture of little concern. What is of concern is that they share a common assumption and adhere to a common philosophy of freedom. Both parties would be critical of the educational effort carried on at Calvin. Were they to measure Calvin against their definition they would be able to find on all the campus not a wisp of academic freedom. What they would find is scholars and teachers building on a Book, men and women pursuing their inquiries in complete reliance on an authoritative Word taken as the absolute rule of knowledge and practice, truth and life. And they would repudiate the whole thing.

* * *

WELL then, that raises the whole question once more: Is there academic freedom at Calvin College? The answer to that question is twofold.

At the level on which the so-called liberal asks it, the answer is, Yes. There is not at Calvin that spurious thing which he calls freedom, but there is genuine freedom, human freedom. The liberal notion of freedom is negative; it is freedom from. At Calvin it is positive; it is freedom for. For the secularist freedom is an end. For the Calvinist it is a means. The Calvinist wants freedom, but he wants it in order to attain a further goal. He wants it in order to attain his true place: under God who made him and above the nature he is called upon to rule.

Academic Freedom — Continued

It is clear to us at Calvin that we are creatures and therefore not wholly sovereign. We know that we do not and cannot exist in ultimate independence. We know that from the nature of the case we and all men have a master, and that by an inviolable law of our being we all serve one, the true one or a false one. We know, therefore, that the question of freedom is never rightly put until one asks: What Lord do you acknowledge? To what do you tie yourself? To whom or what are you basically and finally committed? And we know that there are only three possibilities here: Nature, Man, and God.

We at Calvin choose God, or are chosen by him, and we try to live and think by his word. We bow at this one point and therefore are free at every other — free precisely there and completely there where a human being may and can be free — free of nature and on an equality with men. That is why we are deaf to communism; we have no ear for economic determinism. That is why we resist to the death all tyranny; having given our allegiance to the King of Kings we count no man our master — neither the man on horse back, nor the man in purple, nor the man in the mitred cap. We stand in awe neither of the man in the Cadillac nor of the man in overalls. We are not intimidated by academic nonsense, and we don't bow before the sacred cow of science. We are free men. And we are free men because we have our anchor in the bedrock of the universe.

The secularist, on the other hand, who prates of a human freedom proper only to God, is bound to lose both God and every freedom proper to a creature. On the level of nature he will become the victim of those mechanical monsters — bomb, plane, cannon — that he has the ingenuity to create but not the wit to control. And on the level of society he will fall before a succession of Mussolinis, Hitlers, and Stalins. Having no foot in heaven he has no power to resist the strong men of the earth.

The liberal doesn't want this slavery, of course. He hates communism, he hates tyranny, he hates the bondage of machines and gadgets. He hates them almost as much as he hates the sovereign God of Calvinism. He wants to be free of them all. But, of course, he cannot. He has to make a choice of

masters. He has made his choice, and by it he shall be judged.

* * *

IF the question be asked then: Is there academic freedom at Calvin?, the answer to the secularist in the liberal tradition is, Yes — freedom from the subjectivism, the relativism, the nihilism of the age; freedom from the frustrations, the anxieties, the pessimisms of the times; freedom from the brute uncontrolled "reality" that the unbelieving scholar has imaginatively projected and which, on his own showing, may turn at any moment and engulf him. There is freedom at Calvin: the freedom that comes from walking in The Way.

If, however, the question is asked on another level, by those who stand with us in the same commitment, the answer cannot be quite the same. If it be asked: Is there, within the framework of the Scripture and the Creeds, freedom of inquiry and expression at Calvin?, the answer is, "Yes, but there could be more."

No doubt such an answer can always be given. There is no perfection in this world. There are and always will be accidental and arbitrary restrictions on liberty, even in the best societies. But this is no excuse for their presence. Despite all their actuality, arbitrary restrictions remain undesirable, and they are most undesirable in a Christian community. Here freedom is held as a sacred possession. Here liberty is strictly inviolable. This means that if anywhere, then at Calvin, there should be academic freedom, freedom from extraneous and non-academic restraints.

Let no one misunderstand. There must be restraint. There must be the quite academic restraint of the truth; not the restraint of some merely abstract, amorphous, undefined truth always in process, but the restraint of the truth authoritatively disclosed in Scripture and freely acknowledged in the creeds. By this the scholars and teachers at Calvin are bound. And they are bound by another thing. They are bound by the law of Love, by the obligation to walk humbly with their God and considerately and self-sacrificially with their fellows. But by nothing else are they bound, and with no other yoke should they be burdened.

They must not be compelled to establish anyone in his private conceits, nor

to further the ambitions of any party. They must be free, within the framework of a shared commitment, to come to a conclusion that contravenes the majority opinion, or perchance the opinion of an articulate and militant minority. They must be at liberty to explore new areas of truth, and to do so in their own responsible way. And they must have the same liberty to hold at arm's length new ways of thought however impatiently presented for adoption.

They should be given rein. If it turns out that any one of them has wandered off or become lost, let him be reoriented, or if he be perverse, cut loose. But they should not have men breathing on their necks and constantly peering over their shoulders. They can't work that way. What they need is trust. They must be free to attack knotty and complex problems in the knowledge that they have the confidence of the Church, and they must have the freedom to express and expose to public criticism tentative ideas that may require revision or abandonment.

They also need freedom from the weight of custom and from the tyranny of venerable names. What they need, too, is freedom from fear and reprisals. And what they need most of all is freedom from the sting of uninformed prejudice, freedom from name calling, and freedom from silent but enervating suspicion.

We have all together undertaken a great and delicate task. We have undertaken to construe the world in the categories of eternity. It is a terrifyingly responsible task. To discharge it we need the utmost degree of consecration and competence. Doubtless we need watchfulness too, but it must be the watchfulness of the friend who cares. We need the watchfulness of the brother that is quick to help. What we need is wisdom, loyalty, and charity. And this from all sides.

It will be agreed, I think, that of this we have not had enough. It is only, however, in the measure that we have it that the scholars and teachers at Calvin will be able to perform their demanding tasks. They need this climate, this room, this freedom. They need it in order to do their duty, to inquire into and articulate the whole body of Christian truth, to trace out according to their lights all its implications. They need this freedom for the truth's sake to which they are committed.