

Responses to Thiessen's Academic Freedom in the Religious College and University (3)

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In "Academic Freedom and Religious Colleges and Universities," Thiessen argues that the academic freedom of faculty is no less real in colleges and universities of this kind than in those that are publicly funded. He takes issue with various practices in the United States which deny "full academic freedom" to the former because it suggests that absolute freedom is possible in the latter. This ignores the tendency of publicly-funded universities to regard the scientific method as the only road to truth, and to imagine that it is without bias towards other forms of knowledge, particularly those of a religious nature. Moreover, the assumption that "full academic freedom" is the sole prerogative of "secular universities" fails to acknowledge that it is just as possible to reflect critically on the presuppositions of religion as it is on those of physics.

The presuppositions underlying any discipline can remain unexamined, for example, if their methods enhance the power of their practitioners. Newton's cosmology went largely unchallenged for two centuries in the English-speaking world in just this manner because its power as an explanatory framework of a material universe was beyond question. Similarly, acceptance of Catholic dogma at the mediaeval University of Paris was a *sine qua non* for scholars teaching there. Even Peter Abelard, who challenged the official interpretation of Biblical texts, "did not question the scriptural authority of revelation."¹ In both cases, the refusal to reflect critically upon underlying presuppositions retarded the advance of knowledge, whether in physics or theology, and made academic freedom all the more rare.²

For Thiessen, the search for knowledge taking place in both disciplines (physics and theology) is comparable, since it can be circumscribed by internal pressures stemming from unexamined premises or, alternatively, allowed to flourish relatively freely. He extends this argument to the freedom of inquiry experienced in both religious and publicly-funded universities for, provided that "an open and honest search for the truth" is accompanied by a "periodic reflection upon their operating assumptions," academic freedom can grow in either context. He points out that publicly funded universities tend to be inhibited from recognising the diversity of ways of knowing by the assumption that seventeenth-century science is the "one model of truth-seeking." As a result, not only is religious knowledge ruled out *tout court*, but the humanities in general, as well as the social sciences, must somehow accord with its methods of inquiry. Under such circumstances, academic freedom becomes circumscribed within the narrow confines of a materialist methodology suitable for investigating the causal laws of a mechanical universe, but quite inappropriate for the free and open pursuit of knowledge and truth in a wide variety of disciplines. The scientific method, as already mentioned, has a "peculiar blindness" to its own biases. As Alfred North Whitehead puts it, this methodology has become "the guiding principle of scientific studies . . . [at] every university in the world" to the point that "no alternative system of organising the pursuit of scientific truth has been suggested."³ In light of this virtual monopoly over what is to count as acceptable methods of research, Thiessen's argument has considerable merit.

In order to justify his conclusion that the search for knowledge taking place in universities having religious affiliations is no less free than in those which are publicly funded, he weaves a path through the thicket of arguments between modernism and postmodernism about the nature of knowledge, taking elements of each in order to reach "a reconciliation between the legitimate insights in both." While rejecting modernism's claim that freedom (including academic freedom) can be absolute, Thiessen maintains the notion of truth, without which "epistemological relativism" tends to exclude any transcendental meaning.⁴ This is the danger posed by a postmodernism, which ascribes equal value to oppressed voices hitherto silenced by a triumphant modernism, for all narratives are now equally valid, and all claims to truth must be judged exclusively in terms of the traditions in which they arise. Although he shares the postmodernists' respect for tradition, Thiessen cannot accept their idea that there is no truth which transcends particular traditions and particular times. While wanting to relativise academic freedom so that it can be understood within the traditions from which it arises, he maintains a firm grip on the absolute nature of truth capable of transcending all such traditions. In other words, truth claims are *at the same time* relative to specific traditions of thought and, in principle, capable of approaching absolute truth. In order to do so, they must be part of what Alasdair MacIntyre calls "a living tradition," one in which the "reasoning" which "takes place" is capable of "transcending through criticism and invention the limitations of what had hitherto been reasoned in that tradition."⁵ Here, the need for ongoing self-criticism of the presuppositions of any tradition is re-emphasised in a way that has clear implications for universities. Where traditions of thought or disciplines do not enhance this process, they can hardly make claim to knowledge or truth. Indeed, they stifle the very academic freedom which makes critical inquiry possible. In advocating a balance between tradition and transcendence, Thiessen is offering a criticism of the modern university—namely, that its claims to knowledge have been uniformly in the scientific tradition, and have tended to stifle any freedom of thought either critical of, or outside, that tradition.

Given this sensitivity to tradition, it is odd that Thiessen almost totally overlooks the differences between Canadian and American universities in his account of academic freedom. This may well be because he cannot find a sufficient number of religious universities in Canada to constitute a living tradition in which academic freedom is alive and well. At the same time, religious colleges affiliated with universities abound, existing in relatively harmonious relationship with their larger, secular partners. He also ignores the fact that many of Canada's universities have their origins in religious colleges and universities that were set up explicitly to promote particular doctrinal beliefs: Dalhousie, Laval, Toronto, College Ste. Boniface, and Augustana are just a few of the examples upon which Thiessen could have drawn to make his case in the Canadian context. Of course, this would have required historical research which showed the eventual decline of religious universities in the face of a growing publicly-funded system. And this would not have suited his purposes. Instead, Thiessen looks to the United States for the kind of intellectual vivacity among such universities which he wishes to import into Canada. He seems unaware of the fact that this might be problematical in light of the rather different university tradition which exists in Canada, one which owes much to the Scottish univer-

sities, for example, with their emphasis on days filled with lectures and busy work. Another of their distinctive aims has been to maintain a fairly even quality so that access to one Canadian university should enhance further access to all, at least in principle. This stands in marked contrast to the American system in which the Ivy League universities, as well as private liberal arts colleges, offer undergraduate and graduate education of a superior quality to all but a handful of state universities. Thiessen's blindness to the distinctive tradition of universities in Canada leads him to adopt a position of trying to assimilate them to those of the United States.

This process of Americanisation becomes clearest during his discussion of the history of academic freedom, where almost all of the examples he uses are from the United States. He begins the article with an extended argument against various attempts by the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) to exclude religious colleges and universities from enjoying academic freedom in the "full" sense of the term. Whether in the founding statement of 1915, the precautionary "limitations clause" of 1940, or the 1988 report of a subcommittee on Academic Freedom and Tenure, the AAUP continues to challenge "the moral right [of such universities] to proclaim themselves as authentic seats of higher learning." Indeed, the 1940 clause insists that "limitations of academic freedom because of religious or other aims of the institution should be clearly stated in writing at the time of the appointment."⁶ Thiessen suggests that by looking at this "standard American ideal of academic freedom" one can discern the lack of tolerance in the habitual liberal notion of academic freedom—namely, its bias against religious universities.

Yet, as Thiessen himself points out, this attitude is not shared by the Canadian Society for the Study of Religion (CSSR), who recommended to the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT) in 1993 that academic freedom be applied to all professors teaching in Canadian universities, schools of theology, colleges, and seminaries alike. While CAUT has yet to act on the guidelines presented by CSSR, the fact that such discussion has taken place is indicative of a rather different attitude towards religious universities from that shown by AAUP. There is, in the Canadian example at least, a potential acknowledgement of the relatively free and open discussion of theological, philosophical, curricular, and other matters among the seminaries and colleges affiliated with universities in this country. Thiessen (p. 5), however, appears blinded to this possibility proclaiming that:

It should be clear from this historical review that the general consensus among the secular educational establishment is that such institutions simply cannot have full academic freedom because of their religious commitment.

Unable to see the truth of his own example, he subsumes the Canadian case under the American umbrella, concluding that both are evidence of a "general consensus among the secular educational establishment" that "full academic freedom" cannot exist in universities having religious affiliations. Yet, the work of both CSSR and CAUT suggests that there is no *a priori* reason for thinking that this same consensus exists among Canadian universities. The discussions entered into by CSSR and CAUT enable us to recognise that academic freedom is not peculiar to any one kind of institution. Dialogue is facilitated by the fact that none of the parties is committed to a belief in "full

academic freedom," let alone the idea that it is the sole prerogative of publicly-funded universities. On the contrary, CAUT explicitly recognise the relative nature of academic freedom in their *Model Clause on Academic Freedom*:

Academic freedom carries with it the duty to use that freedom in a manner consistent with the scholarly obligation to base research and teaching on an honest search for knowledge.⁷

In other words, the academic freedom of faculty in teaching and research is relative to their "duty" and "scholarly obligation" to engage in "an honest search for knowledge." Where this search for knowledge is neither honest nor truthful, faculty may step outside the bounds of academic freedom. Moreover, even where they are engaged in an "honest search," there is no suggestion that faculty are protected by "full academic freedom" understood in any absolutist sense. This idea simply does not appear in the CAUT document, which stands in marked contrast to those of AAUP. The latter consistently invoke the notion of "full academic freedom" to deny that religiously-affiliated universities could ever sustain academic freedom among their faculty. CAUT make no such claim.

Thiessen's determination to Americanise our thinking about academic freedom leads him to make other *faux pas*. He overlooks the very different manner in which faculty in the two countries conceive of the limits of academic freedom. According to certain American theorists, faculty are free "to research, publish, teach, or even to express themselves outside of the college/university" only on matters falling within their "area of professional competence." They can speak out where "the professional standards of their respective disciplines" justify the claims they make, but have no academic freedom to express views that fall outside of these strictly defined limits. This would mean that faculty members in the humanities are not free to make statements about the pollution of the Great Lakes, even if they have spent considerable time inquiring critically into the matter. If they do so, they should know full well that when criticised by colleagues, administrators, government officials, or business corporations, they are no longer protected by academic freedom from pressures which may impede their right to "research, publish . . . [and] teach." Academic freedom supposedly ceases once they step outside their area of expertise, narrowly conceived as a specialised form of professional knowledge.⁸

While such views exist in Canada, they are by no means universally accepted by faculty, their associations, or even university administrators. The value of stepping outside one's area of professional specialisation to speak out on matters of more general concern is recognised by these various constituencies, even if some of them find it troubling. For, in this direction lies the possibility of a dialogue between universities and society at large, a means to enhance the growth of knowledge beyond the walls of the so-called ivory tower. In order for this process to flourish, however, faculty must enjoy academic freedom lest their skirmishes with powerful forces outside the university be held against them as proof of professional incompetence or even as grounds for dismissal.⁹ CAUT explicitly supports this non-professionalised view of academic freedom in the following way:

The common good of society depends upon the search for knowledge and its free expression. Academic freedom in universities is essential to both these purposes in the teaching function of the university as well as in its scholarship and research. Academic staff shall not be hindered or impeded in any way by the university or the faculty association from exercising their legal rights as citizens, nor shall they suffer any penalties because of the exercise of such legal rights. The parties agree that they will not infringe or abridge the academic freedom of any member of the academic community.¹⁰

The key concept here is the “the common good of society,” which is used to justify the practice of academic freedom. CAUT establish a series of connections that flow through the university from its relationships with society, thereby enriching the notion of academic freedom immeasurably. To begin with, a close relationship is established between the common good, the search for knowledge, and its free expression, for these latter activities are open to anyone wishing to engage in a process of knowing that can be shared among all participants at least in principle.¹¹ The search for knowledge of this kind commonly takes the form of teaching, scholarship, and research in universities, and academic freedom is needed if it is to thrive. But the common good also requires that faculty should not be prevented by universities or faculty associations from exercising their rights as citizens to speak out on issues like the pollution of the Great Lakes. This holds true even if they are not professionally qualified in the requisite disciplines for they should not “suffer any penalties” for making statements or engaging in activities related to their rights as citizens. Moreover, their academic freedom should not be tampered with as a result of engaging in such activities. For the common good of society would be threatened to the extent that the ability of faculty to pursue knowledge and express it freely would be undermined in their teaching, scholarship, and research.

This rich notion of academic freedom transcends the limitations imposed on it by any narrow professionalism, and makes Thiessen’s views seem inappropriate in the Canadian context. Blinded to the importance of the common good, he tries to import an American model of academic freedom which recognises only private goods—namely, those goods which are contingently associated with the pursuit of knowledge. These include the wealth, status, and power which accrue to those who control it once the process of knowing is reduced to a product or commodity that can be exchanged in the market.¹² Put differently, unless knowledge is regarded as a public good to be shared among those searching for it, it quickly becomes no more than a private good to be cashed in for profit. I do not think that Thiessen is actually aware of this reductionism when he rubs his hands together metaphorically at the prospect of the demise of publicly-funded universities. Nevertheless, he does believe that, when “the secular edifice” finally “come[s] tumbling down,” religious colleges and universities will be acknowledged “as equal partners” in which “full academic freedom” can be enjoyed. But, will they? It seems more likely that, were the system of publicly-funded universities to collapse, any notion of the common good might disappear from the activities of teaching, scholarship, and research. The value of disciplines like religion or philosophy would be diminished since their immediate utility to the accumulation of private wealth is not at all obvious. Universities would have difficulty in sustaining scholarship and teaching in these and other disciplines and would be “equal partners” only

to the extent that their shared intellectual heritage had been plundered. In place of this tradition would likely be a rampant commercialism, fed by multinational corporations whose grip over the pursuit of knowledge would spell the end of academic freedom in what was left of both publicly-funded and religiously-affiliated colleges and universities.

I cannot believe that Thiessen is really in favour of such a scenario; at the same time, the logic of his argument leads to this disquieting conclusion.

Notes

¹ Gerald L. Gutek, *A History of the Western Educational Experience* (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland, 1972/1995), p. 108.

² Thiessen is loathe to provide a definition of academic freedom himself, partly because "it lacks a clear and precise meaning." Nevertheless, he might have alluded to the account given by the Supreme Court of Canada as "the free and fearless search for knowledge. . .", *McKinney vs. University of Guelph* in G. Sanagan (ed.), *Supreme Court of Canada Reports Service*, (2nd edition) (Toronto: ON: Butterworths, 1981), p. 9624, though this may be too "modernist" for his taste. His lack of precision is reflected in an apparent confusion between academic freedom and the institutional autonomy enjoyed by the guilds of scholars at the University of Paris when he writes of the "mediaeval concern to protect quasi-ecclasiastical universities from undue interference from temporal powers"—a point to which Alfred North Whitehead draws attention in *Adventures of Ideas* (New York: The Free Press, 1933/1961), p. 58.

³ Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (New York: The Free Press, 1925/1953), p. 54.

⁴ Not all modernists advocate freedom of expression as an absolute good. Bertrand Russell, for example, came to think of it following the carnage of the First World War as secondary to the survival of humankind. See *Education and the Social Order* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1932), Chapter 12.

⁵ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (2nd ed.) (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1984), p. 222.

⁶ Cited in William W. Van Alstyne (ed.), *Freedom and Tenure in the Academy* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), pp. 309-407.

⁷ Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT), "Model Clause on Academic Freedom for Collective Agreements and Faculty Handbooks," *Handbook* (3rd ed.) (Ottawa, ON: 1979), p. 46.

⁸ Whitehead criticises professionalism for adopting the methods of seventeenth century science, and for training "minds in a groove" too easily swayed by its "abstractions," which are "divorced" from concrete experience, *op. cit.*, p. 197. In contrast, Thiessen is critical of the scientific method, but accepts the abstract limitations which professionalism imposes on the academic freedom of faculty.

⁹ As happened to David Noble, who was dismissed from MIT for expressing his views on "the atmosphere of self-censorship and intimidation that was beginning to take hold on the nation's campuses in the wake of commercialisation." Professor Noble now teaches at York University in Toronto. See his "Technology Transfer at MIT: A Critical View," in Norman E. Bowie (ed.),

University-Business Partnerships (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1994), pp. 135-136.

¹⁰ CAUT, "Model Clause," *op. cit.*, p. 46.

¹¹ John McMurtry, "Education and the Market Model," *Paideusis*, 5(1), 1991, pp. 36-44.

¹² MacIntyre refers to these as "external goods," which he contrasts with the "internal goods" distinctive of an activity, such as the joy of learning and the precision required for the pursuit of knowledge, *op. cit.*, pp. 188-189.