

## A Rejoinder to Beck, Bellous, and Woodhouse

Elmer J. Thiessen, Medicine Hat College

It would seem that my three responders all agree in the main with the central thrust of my paper. While Beck specifically affirms the "essential soundness" of my position (p. 22), Woodhouse, at one point in his accurate and fair summary of my philosophical argument, briefly states that he finds considerable merit in my epistemological position (p. 31). Bellous explicitly says that she agrees with much of what I have to say (p. 25).

Let me begin by responding to some of the commentators' criticisms which I consider to be more tangential to my central argument. One concern which Bellous and Woodhouse share has to do with the target of my critical analysis. In his main criticism, Woodhouse suggests that my account of academic freedom "almost totally overlooks" the differences between Canadian and American universities (p. 31). Bellous goes even further and asks whether I am "wrestling with scarecrows or real villains" (p. 24).

Here, it needs to be noted first that these criticisms apply to my attempt to contextualize the argument and in no way undermine my *philosophical* argument. Contrary to Bellous and Woodhouse, I would suggest that I am wrestling with "real villains," even in the Canadian context. In my article, I drew attention to one expression of concern about violations of academic freedom at religious colleges made by a Canadian academic society.<sup>1</sup> Many other cases could be cited.<sup>2</sup> I also simply disagree with Woodhouse that Canadian higher education is as distinctive as he suggests. Further, Canadian statements on academic freedom are, in fact, very close to the influential American statement.<sup>3</sup> In both cases, implicit and explicit references are made to *full* academic freedom even though this would seem to contradict qualifications often included in these same statements. For example, the CAUT model clause on academic freedom, makes implicit reference to full academic freedom when talking about the "free exposition" of knowledge, and when it is maintained that faculty shall not be hindered or impeded "in any way" by the university or faculty association from exercising their right as citizens (Goede, 1979, p. 46). And what about Woodhouse's own reference to a Supreme Court of Canada description of academic freedom as "the free and fearless search for knowledge"?<sup>4</sup> This surely sounds like full freedom!

But all of this is rather beside the point. The fact remains that some (or many) academics in Canada and the United States (it does not really matter how many or where they live) do object to religious colleges and universities because of their supposed lack of full academic freedom such as exists at secular educational institutions. The central purpose of my paper was to provide a *philosophical* answer to that objection.

Woodhouse does make one substantive criticism of a more philosophical nature. He repeatedly suggests that I am intent on Americanizing Canadian universities, or importing an American model of academic freedom to Canada (pp. 32-34). He argues that because I "import an American model of academic freedom which recognizes only private goods," we will see "the demise of publicly-funded universities," where knowledge is regarded as "a public good" (p. 34). Instead, knowledge will become "no more than a private good to be cashed in for profit" (p. 34).

This objection would seem to commit the fallacy of straw-man because I never did argue for the Americanization of Canadian universities, or for the importing of an American model of academic freedom to Canada. Indeed, most of my essay is devoted to criticizing the influential AAUP statement of academic freedom. Woodhouse also seems to be guilty of a slippery slope fallacy. It simply does not follow that my revised ideal of normal academic freedom will necessarily lead to the demise of publicly-funded universities, or that knowledge will now be viewed only as a private good, or that the pursuit of knowledge will be replaced by “rampant commercialization” (p. 35). Indeed, I am as opposed to the grip of multinational corporations on the pursuit of knowledge as is Woodhouse (and we must not forget that public universities are not immune to this danger).

It should further be pointed out that religious educational institutions can serve the public good as well as do public universities.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, Woodhouse fails to entertain the possibility of publicly-funded religious institutions. Indeed, it would seem that if religious colleges serve the public good as well as (perhaps even better than) secular colleges and universities, they should be equally entitled to public funding. This would circumvent the danger of private interests and rampant commercialization.

Beck and Bellous, on the other hand, focus on the postmodernist elements of my argument. Except for some minor differences as to the interpretation of the heart of postmodernism, we are in agreement with the essential thrust of postmodernism as a reaction to the Enlightenment. We agree that the self must always be seen as embodied, historical, situated, and in community and that we should never be embarrassed about our particular identity. We also agree that an ideal of academic freedom which fails to acknowledge these dimensions of human existence is unrealistic.

Bellous, however, worries about my still wanting to hang on, in part, to the old-fashioned (modernist) notion of truth (p. 27). And I clearly do! As I stated in my article, my aim is to reconcile modernism and postmodernism. While I agree that all thinking must start with the particular, thinking invariably also seeks to transcend its particularity by aspiring to a view from nowhere, a view that is uncontaminated by any perspectival factors, a view that is true.<sup>6</sup> One reason we seek to transcend our particularity is because of the worry that what we believe might be wrong. This inescapable worry about error presupposes an ideal of truth which transcends human opinion, whether individual or within a community.

What is surprising is that Beck shares Bellous' concern about my wanting to retain the ideal of truth. Beck is very explicit: “Universal truth should not be retained as an ideal” (p. 19). I find this surprising because, earlier in his essay, Beck identifies my attempt to find a balance between the insights of modernism and postmodernism as a strength of my paper (p. 18). But surely such a balance must also include a reconciliation of the epistemological insights of modernism (eternal and universal truth), and postmodernism (fallibilism and a stress on the contextual nature of the search for truth). Unfortunately, Beck betrays his more defensible, balanced position and, in the end, seems to side completely with postmodernist epistemology, as does Bellous.

Both writers reject the ideal of universal truth in favour of a postmodernist epistemology, and they do so for similar reasons. Bellous' primary concern

about retaining the notion of truth, even as a goal of our epistemic striving, is that it creates a "willingness to be imperialistic" (p. 27). It creates "the tendency to impose personal truth on others in an absolute and dogmatic way" (p. 27). Beck similarly identifies the universalistic tendencies in Christianity as the cause for churches often riding rough-shod over local traditions and communities (p. 19).

Do not Beck and Bellous commit the fallacy of false cause here? It is not the affirmation of the existence of truth in and of itself that causes imperialism and dogmatism. The real culprit is the failure to cultivate a proper humility about the human ability to reach truth. Human beings are finite and fallible and, therefore, only know in part. We only see the truth dimly. I quite agree with Beck and Bellous that all too often Christians have forgotten this key insight of their own Scriptures (see I Corinthians 13:9, 12). It is a sad commentary on the history of the Christian church that it has often displayed a dogmatism and an imperialism that is deservedly condemned. It is not truth that is to blame, but rather a failure on the part of the human bearers of the truth.

Beck and Bellous further fail to realize that radical postmodernism is not immune to the dangers of imperialism. Indeed, I had issued a warning about the conflict model of truth that pervades postmodernist treatments of academic freedom (p. 10). Taking on the guise of a silenced and marginalized victim, a strategy that is very common among postmodernists, can be as manipulative and imperialistic as the overt affirmations of having a complete grasp of the truth on the part of modernists. All humans, including postmodernists, may be guilty of the sin of imperialism.

Bellous points to relativism as "an antidote to cultural imperialism in the last century," and as "a necessary step in ridding ourselves of the tendency to impose personal truth on others in an absolute and dogmatic way" (p. 27). Beck also seems to be advocating relativism when he argues "that our notion of truth must be radically revised in order to fit with the contextual nature of inquiry," and when he advocates a more pluralistic understanding of religious truth (p. 20). Such claims seem to rest on some fundamental confusions. First, one needs to distinguish clearly between the human search for the truth (which is contextual and fallible and even "relative"), and "truth" as the goal of this search, which must be seen as absolute, if any sense is to be made of human curiosity and our willingness to dialogue and argue with others who are seen as being in error.

Further, it is not relativism, but humility in affirming one's grasp of the truth, that will help us to avoid the evils that Bellous and Beck are so concerned about. Relativism is an incoherent epistemic position and, therefore, cannot be a cure for anything—a point I cannot pursue in detail here. Bellous herself illustrates this incoherence when she seems to reject relativism and states her preference for perspectivism which allows that "some interpretations are better than others" (p. 27). Yes, indeed, but is this not to acknowledge the drive to transcend one's limited perspective and to strive for the truth? What postmodernists further fail to realize is that the relativism inherent in their position ultimately undermines their own critique of the evils of the Enlightenment.<sup>7</sup>

I conclude, therefore, that Bellous and Beck go too far in accepting the postmodernist agenda. I would argue instead for a happy blend between the insights of modernism and postmodernism (as does Beck at one point).

Beck raises one other problem. It would seem that he agrees with my overall position with regard to the possibility of academic freedom at religious colleges and universities, but he is worried about the concrete implications of my defence (pp. 20, 21). He sees my paper as "too abstract and procedural" (p. 21). "We need more detail on how the constraints would work" (p. 20). "We might agree with him in theory but violently disagree on substance" (p. 21).

Yes, philosophical argument is by its nature abstract and theoretical. But it is very important to get the theory right! If we do, then the detailed application should be right as well, if only we deduce the practical implications in a consistent manner. Clearly, one cannot accomplish everything in a short paper. I had cautioned the reader not to expect precision in working out the details of the application of the ideal of academic freedom (p. 13).

But let me deal with one practical implication that Beck is worried about—namely, my suggestion that the limitations to academic freedom should be clearly defined. This, he argues, "smacks of legalism and credal conformity and is likely to induce hypocrisy and mere lip-service" (p. 20). Beck proposes instead that these constraints should "reside in the sediment of the community's consciousness *rather* than in the clear light of day" (p. 20—my emphasis).

Clearly, there is something right about Beck's concerns and his alternative. His error, however, is to assume that we are stuck with an either-or choice. A committed Catholic philosopher, for example, will have accepted a Catholic university's statement of faith as her own (it will be embedded in her consciousness), and she will not at all feel that this statement is a legalistic constraint on her freedom. Voluntary submission is surely quite in keeping with the liberal ideal of autonomy.

The danger of seeing these constraints on freedom as residing *only* in the sediment of a community's consciousness, as Beck suggests, is that they can then be even more oppressive than if they are out in the open. This, I would suggest is the problem at secular universities today where there are implicit constraints, and woe betide the faculty member who does not abide by the unstated rules of the academic game. We need openness about the limitations on academic freedom at *all* educational institutions. Hopefully, the constraints will not be seen as onerous because, by and large, they are embedded within the consciousness of the professors<sup>8</sup>.

In the end, I suspect, Beck's real concerns are not so much with the *principle* of credal conformity, as with the *content* of the creed which faculty are expected to adopt at some religious colleges and universities. Clearly, Beck prefers a more liberal form of Christianity, "a more pluralistic, inclusive understanding of religion and ways of life" (p. 22). But there are other more conservative interpretations of Christianity! And why should the one be seen as more appropriate or correct than the other? Indeed, in making a judgement on this, is not Beck adopting the very universalism that he is opposed to? Instead, we need to be more open and tolerant, and recognize that rational people simply differ with regard to credal commitments.

Beck goes even further and suggests that "there should be more acknowledgement of current inappropriate forms of constraint in many such institutions, and a commitment to move in a more pluralistic, inclusive direction" (p. 22). He also wants a reduction of "the distinctively religious ethos" of conservative religious institutions (p. 22).<sup>9</sup>

But does not this suggestion smack of the very same legalism and credal conformity which Beck finds so offensive at conservative schools? It is one thing to disagree with conservative Christianity. It is quite another thing to impose a liberal version of Christianity on all religious schools. Here again we need to respect each other's differences, and allow for differing institutional expressions of these differences. Without this, liberals are guilty of the very imperialism that they condemn in conservatives. Both traditions can and should avoid such imperialism.

Instead, as Bellous notes, we need to foster "dialogical and open environments" (p. 27), and this is quite possible even within a system of educational pluralism, as I pointed out (p. 12ff.). Healthy commitments to truth do not preclude openness, tolerance, and dialogue with others who differ. And although this seems "paradoxical" (Beck, p. 19), it is not a contradiction, though I agree much more needs to be done by way of spelling out how a healthy balance between commitment and openness can be maintained.<sup>10</sup>

Let me summarize by clearing up one possible misinterpretation of my essay related to my tentative suggestion of educational pluralism as one implication of my central argument. The point of my essay was not to argue for "the demise of publicly-funded universities," as Woodhouse suggests at one point (p. 34), but rather for the demise of the "foundations" of a wrong-headed secular ideal of academic freedom. With new foundations, hopefully a time will come when religious schools will be recognized as equal partners with secular schools in being authentic seats of higher learning.

My thanks to Beck, Bellous and Woodhouse for their many insightful comments and for initiating a stimulating dialogue.<sup>11</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, Woodhouse misinterprets my intent in using this example. I did *not* cite it to show that American prejudices against religious schools are not shared by the Canadian Society for the Study of Religion. Indeed, my intent was precisely the opposite. I would further question Woodhouse's interpretation of the CSSR recommendation. See my endnote #9 for details regarding the meeting at which this matter was discussed.

<sup>2</sup> The minutes of the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Philosophical Association, June 12, 1984 report that an ad hoc committee of the Association had investigated alleged violations of academic freedom at St. Thomas More College, affiliated with the University of Saskatchewan.

In 1986/7 the humanities faculty at the University of Calgary, formally expressed concern about having a Catholic college affiliate with the university, in part because this might jeopardize the "academic integrity" of the university which is "to promote free inquiry" (*Alberta Report*, January 12, 1987, p. 28).

In a recent paper presented to the CSSR, Tom Sinclair-Faulkner cites two allegations of violations of academic freedom at religious colleges in Canada ("We weren't sure they want academic freedom. . . .": The Problem of Theologians in the Canadian University System," June 5, 1993).

Most recently, Trinity Western University was victim to the imposition of a secular ideal of academic freedom when the British Columbia College of

Teachers denied TWA's application to operate the final year of its elementary teacher education program because of some Christian behavioural standards imposed on their students (*The Financial Post*, July 20-22, 1996, p. 16).

<sup>3</sup> As I point out in my endnote #5.

<sup>4</sup> See his endnote #2.

<sup>5</sup> See my endnote #32.

<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, Bellous misinterprets my position at this point. At no time did I say that we can "come from nowhere"—this would be to betray the central postmodernist insight with which I agree entirely. Instead, the view from nowhere is a goal, a heuristic principle, something towards which we strive, as we seek to transcend our particularity.

<sup>7</sup> For a statement of this same criticism from a feminist perspective, see Evelyn Fox Keller, "Feminism and Science," in *The Signs Reader*, edited by Elizabeth Abel and Emily K. Abel (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), pp. 109-22.

<sup>8</sup> See my essay, p. 7ff.

<sup>9</sup> Here, I can only note a further theoretical problem with Beck's downplaying of the role that religion plays in a religious school. His position rests on the liberal tendency to trivialize religion by artificially creating a sacred/secular split and by relegating religion to the private domain.

<sup>10</sup> See E.J. Thiessen, *Teaching for Commitment: Liberal Education, Indoctrination, and Christian Nurture* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993), Chs. 6 & 9.

<sup>11</sup> My thanks also to John Portelli for his careful handling of the editorial task and to Murray Elliott and two other anonymous readers for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of the original paper.