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Religion, Sectarianism, and the Pursuit of Truth: Reexamining Academic Freedom in the Twenty-First Century

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Abstract

The one hundredth anniversary of the AAUP in 2015 offers us an opportunity to consider how the concept of academic freedom might evolve in the future. In this essay I offer a friendly critique of our customary understanding of academic freedom, not because the principle of it is wrong but because our understanding of it is incomplete. This incompleteness leads to shortcomings in the practice of academic freedom, shortcomings that need to be addressed, particularly in religiously affiliated institutions. I make my case in three steps: (1) I examine sectarian obstacles—both religious and secular—to academic freedom; (2) I offer a brief history of the development of academic freedom in the United States and show why it is not always as freeing in practice as its ideal suggests; and (3) I 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 of academic freedom for the twenty-first century.

Let us agree. Principles of academic freedom and the confessional commitments of religiously affiliated universities do not always coalesce. 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 considerable 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 religion¹—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”²² and “a pretext to teach [false philosophical] systems which destroy all freedom.”²³ Although discord continues, the antagonism is not nearly as broad-based as in the past. Fortunately, the principle of intellectual and academic freedom has advanced significantly during the past half century, in no small part to the perseverance of the American Association of University Professors. Many religiously affiliated universities now adhere to principles of academic freedom and tenure, even if uneasily at times.

The year 2015 marks the one hundredth anniversary of the AAUP and the seventy-fifth anniversary of its *1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure*, so it is an opportune time to reflect on the invaluable service the AAUP has provided universities, especially its consistent advocacy of scholarly freedom. Academic freedom is now almost universally acknowledged to be a principal foundation of modern university life and is the sine qua non of a mature university. An indication of the AAUP’s progress is that its efforts today focus not primarily on persuading institutions to adopt principles of academic freedom but on investigating and censuring institutions that formally adopt but then violate these principles in particular instances. Higher education in America owes a great debt to organizations like the AAUP for the free flow of ideas and the security scholars have in expressing them.

The year 2015 also offers an opportunity to consider how the concept and practice of academic freedom might evolve in the future. With that in mind, I offer a friendly intervention into our customary understanding of academic freedom, not because the principle of it is wrong—it is not—but because our understanding of it is incomplete. And this incompleteness leads to certain shortcomings in the practice of academic freedom, shortcomings that need to be addressed, particularly in religiously affiliated institutions, but everywhere, really.

Let me say right off that my intervention is not going to cover the usual hot-button issues that arise when academic and intellectual freedom are debated in the context of religious institutions, for example, scholars’ (including theologians’) right to dissent from magisterial authorities—not because they aren’t important, but because they have already been well covered. Instead, I’m going to approach the topic from a very different angle—a theological one—that will enable me to point in a direction where our understanding still needs to evolve: scholars must be free to pursue connections between their disciplines and philosophical or theological insight, however they may conceive the latter. By “theological insight” I do not mean pronouncements by religious authorities; nor do I mean adherence to dogmas or to literal interpretations of religious texts that must be accepted without skepticism and critical assessment; instead, I mean this: 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 these connections should be pursued.

Not all scholars experience such spiritual awareness, of course, and not even those who do must pursue the connections between their discipline and theological insight. In fact, most won't, 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. That is my central thesis, and a provocative one in need of explication. My argument for this thesis will proceed in three steps.

First, I'll discuss sectarian obstacles to academic freedom. Second, I'll present a brief history of the development of academic freedom in the modern university and then point out how it is not always as freeing in practice as the ideal of it would suggest. Third, I'll offer a theological understanding of academic freedom—one that not only builds on existing principles but also completes them. The theological principles I present will be from the Roman Catholic tradition because that's the one I know and work in, though I believe what I have to say will be of equal value to other religiously affiliated universities and, indeed, all universities.

First though, let me state what I consider the core definition of academic freedom. The AAUP's 1915 *General Report of the Committee on Academic Freedom and Academic Tenure*, claims that it is the freedom of scholars to teach, to conduct research, and to present the results thereof. "The scholar must be absolutely free not only to pursue his investigations but to declare the results of his researches, no matter where they may lead him or to what extent they may come into conflict with accepted opinion."⁴ This sentence is key 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 ideologies.

I will now proceed to my three steps.

Step 1: Sectarian Obstacles to Academic Freedom

What do I mean by "sectarian?" Broadly viewed, a sect is a group that is intolerant of other groups and belief systems. It's not that it distinguishes itself from other groups—all groups do this to some degree—but rather that it excludes others. By "sectarian" I mean a smug certainty of the truth of one's own views and an intolerance of other viewpoints. The sectarian will not entertain or try to understand the thoughts of others and will not enter civilly into dialogue with their viewpoints. He or she simply excludes, condemns, or misrepresents their views without giving them serious consideration and without letting them have their say.

I will discuss two basic kinds of sectarian obstacles. The first is religious, the kind that usually comes to mind. Religious groups usually believe their viewpoint is *the* correct one and some of them too readily dismiss other perspectives. They are sometimes characterized by closed-mindedness, censorship, and exclusivity. In fact, in American jurisprudence, the word *sectarian* is synonymous with “religious” and is considered the opposite of “secular.” This linkage of sectarianism to religion came to have its pejorative connotation for 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 associate religion with sectarian strife and to consider religion and sectarianism to be 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 *rapprochement*, and I hope readers of this journal will see this essay as a plea for that.

The second form of sectarianism, what I call *secular* sectarianism, rarely gets discussed. The term may sound counterintuitive, so let me explain what I am and am not claiming. I am *not* claiming that secular disciplinary *methodologies* constitute instances of sectarianism. Nor do I assert that secularism itself represents a form of sectarianism. We can best understand my meaning by progressing carefully through several steps.

First, *secular disciplinary methodologies*. 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. Most scholars, even religious ones, ignore or 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. 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 (“beyond physics”), 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 nonetheless a

reasonable philosophical belief system. Rational belief in spiritual reality does not come easily to many, and scholars understandably 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 invaluable contributions to scholarship and to our cultural and intellectual life. They are often more open-minded than some of their religious counterparts.

Some scholars, however, move beyond secularism to what I have called secular sectarianism, which is 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 religious faith as nonsense, delusional, or in the case of scientists such as Richard Dawkins, evil. “I think a case can be made that *faith* is one of the world’s great evils,” Dawkins has said, “comparable to the smallpox virus but harder to eradicate.”⁵ 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.⁶ 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 orthodoxies not mirror the authoritarianism and closed-mindedness of religious dogmatists?

Step 2: A Brief History of Academic Freedom

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.⁷

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, the German ideal of the unity of knowledge and the goal of placing specialized studies within a broader philosophical or theological context did not survive for long in America. The concept of academic freedom took on uniquely American characteristics and became increasingly restricted. Historians Jon Roberts and James Turner have shown how this freedom to roam widely began to slowly disappear in the late nineteenth century. Scholars with broad, interdisciplinary interests and backgrounds—not uncommon in the mid-nineteenth century—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, 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, “scholarly competence required restricting oneself to one’s ‘discipline.’”⁸

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 and humility—a recognition of the limits of one’s knowledge. A scholar ought not to claim expertise in a field where he or she does not, in fact, possess it. 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 for gaining tenure or further promotion. Many young scholars today are painfully aware of these unwritten taboos that curtail their freedom. That freedom is especially bridled if one wishes to engage religious or theological knowledge.

This gradual constriction is mirrored in the historical development of the concept of academic freedom itself, at least 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. The scholar, the reports’ authors insisted, must be “absolutely free not only to pursue his investigations but to declare the results of his researches, *no matter where they may lead him or to what extent they may come into conflict with accepted opinion.*”⁹ 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): “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.”¹⁰ The committee report then describes the vital function that *natural* and *social* scientists perform, but it does not follow up on its statement about the freedom to pursue spiritual truth or “ultimate realities.” It just leaves this point hanging there.

The AAUP’s *1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure* is still the basic statement we use today. Interestingly, it omits entirely that dangling reference to the pursuit of spiritual truth. Moreover, a key phrase from the 1915 statement, “no matter where [the scholar’s researches] may lead him or to what extent they may come into conflict with accepted opinion,” is absent—perhaps inadvertently so—but missing nonetheless. I do not believe anyone connected with the AAUP would hesitate to espouse this phrase today, but 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.”

In the 1950s the concept of academic freedom was gradually whittled down to one’s “field of competence”¹¹ and did not explicitly extend to the freedom to pursue truth beyond it. In the US setting 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 disciplinary orthodoxy.

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 to actually 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.¹² 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.”¹³ Theological insight, then, became an “invasion” of this realm of scientific investigation and was always understood as something accepted blindly without critical thinking, without assessment of facts and experience, and always came from some “outside authority.” It was never understood as 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, and that that “transcendent surplus” ought to be explored. 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.

I am not suggesting that the gradual constriction of academic freedom is the result of some conspiracy by secular ideologues. To the contrary, 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 acrimony and mutual hostility between the secular sciences and religious authority. When scientists and secular scholars saw the banning of certain books and the knee-jerk condemnation of novel scientific and philosophical theories, it was understandable that they would retreat from any engagement with religious thought, withdraw into their own scholarly domains, and even declare, as did Steven Jay Gould, that science and theology comprise “non-overlapping magisterial authorities,”¹⁴ each with its own separate turf, and the twain need never meet. 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. 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 institutes 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, and literary scholars are taking notice.¹⁵ Biologists and physicists have worked with social scientists and theologians on issues of common concern, such as global climate change.¹⁶ 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 between religion 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. However, and alas, the sectarianisms remain, 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, making it truly freeing for all scholars—especially those in religiously affiliated universities, but others as well. Many readers of this journal will find that claim incomprehensible, so bear with me as I explain.

Principles of academic freedom in the religiously affiliated university must incorporate current secular standards, yet they must be grounded 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 that "surplus of knowledge and meaning" I have twice referred to. The great beauty and intricacy of the world are so alluring that the human mind is enkindled and often drawn to God as the source of that beauty. 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.¹⁷

The German theologian Karl Rahner pointed out that humans are beings with an infinite horizon; they reach beyond their finitude and experience themselves as transcendent, spiritual beings.¹⁸ This infinite horizon evokes wonder, and leads one to investigate and learn. This, in turn, leads to further questions and searching, tending always—implicitly or explicitly—toward knowledge of the divine ground of all being. 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.¹⁹ 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."²⁰ 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, as at the center of true religiousness."²¹ Einstein also believed there is a deep consonance and harmony between science and religion. "Science without religion," he said, "is lame; religion, without science, is blind."²²

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."²³ 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 can at least meet and have a dialogue. Let’s give them the freedom and space to do that, freed of the shackles of narrow sectarianisms, religious and secular.

To claim, as many do, that scholars must remain within their specialized domains, in the realm of the finite, is to make a philosophical and epistemological claim about the human mind.²⁴ Theology challenges that claim because the mind has an insatiable drive for ever-greater understanding, for completeness of understanding within an ultimate horizon. Although scientists cannot discover anything corresponding to spiritual reality through accepted scientific methods of inquiry, their explorations, if not truncated, lead to the limits of scientific knowledge and to broader questions about God and about the ultimate ground of all existence. The British theoretical physicist John Polkinghorne, for example, after twenty-five years as a scientist, realized that there is something deeper to reality than what could be discovered through science. “[Science’s] enthralling account,” he wrote, “is not sufficient by itself to quench our thirst for understanding, for science describes only one dimension of the many-layered reality within which we live. . . . All my life I have been trying to explore reality. That exploration includes science, but it also necessarily takes me beyond it.”²⁵ This led him inexorably toward philosophical and theological questions.

Not all scholars are called to pursue a trajectory toward an ultimate horizon, of course, and most will not. But all must be *free* to do so. 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. Not everyone has to explicitly relate knowledge in their disciplines to religious truth. But the university must also protect those who do want to pursue knowledge beyond their disciplines to the theological realm.

This is no mere abstract principle. It goes to the heart of academic freedom for *all* scholars. Although many natural and social scientists are atheists or agnostic, many others are religious.²⁶ If some of them want to pursue truth beyond their disciplinary boundaries into the realm of theological insight, should they not be free to do so without fear of censure by their peers? Two examples—one from the natural and another from the social sciences—may help clarify how this might be done.

The Natural Sciences

Science is rooted in wonder—wonder at the marvelous intricacy of the natural world, of its beauty, of how it works, of what it is made and where it came from. Wonder leads to curiosity and inquiry, to investigation and experimentation. Scientists, using the scientific method, focus on a defined field of reality—some aspect of the natural world—while detaching their consideration of it from other aspects of reality. When they encounter and observe the natural world, a sense of wonder arises in their minds, and they desire to know the

cause of things, how and why they work. We can readily see this movement of the mind in scientific fields. When astrophysicists survey the vastness of the universe, learn of its great age, and decipher its beginnings, they are sometimes led to reflect on the mystery of the universe and are naturally led to think of God.²⁷ Microbiologists who study the minutest elements of living matter ineluctably come face to face with a mystery that their science cannot answer. They can never quite grasp the full essence of things in a comprehensive way, but their quest reveals an insatiable desire to comprehend the totality of existence in its essence. The scientific discovery of the origin and development of the universe inevitably raises the question, “Where did it come from? Where did the energy that caused the initial explosion (the Big Bang) and formed the material of the universe come from?”

Astrophysicists have discovered 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.²⁸ 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.”²⁹ 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.”³⁰ 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.³¹ 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 universe³² or, at the very least, of a master mind ordering the cosmos. Freeman Dyson concludes “from the existence of these ‘accidents’ [cosmic coincidences] of physics and astronomy that the universe is an unexpectedly hospitable place for living creatures. . . . Being a scientist . . . 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.”³³ Dyson also writes that “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.”³⁴ He is correct that evidence from cosmic, or anthropic, coincidences does not *prove* the existence of God, let alone the truths of any particular religion; but it certainly is *suggestive*. It leads some scientists to wonder if some great mind is ordering the universe. Einstein, as we saw, held such a view. And yet, scientific materialists strenuously reject the possibility of *design*. The very word invokes what Paul Davies calls the “T-word”: *teleology*, the principle that nature tends toward certain ends, and thus is designed.³⁵ Teleology is anathema for most scientists; reductive, scientific materialism is the only token allowed on the table,³⁶ 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 institutions. This scientific search is based on the assumption that life is not a fluke but that, given a sufficiently stable geology, the right chemical elements, and the right distance from a star, life will not only emerge but evolve toward ever-increasing sentience until intelligent beings appear.³⁷ 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?

Given the suggestive nature of cosmic coincidences, and the unavoidable questions about where the laws of nature came from, and why and how the universe began in the first place, is it not legitimate for scientists to at least bring up the broader question of God, mind, and design, that is, to have an additional token on the table besides reductive, scientific materialism? After all, it is the findings of science that have raised these broader questions. And indeed, a handful of prominent scientists, though not many, do debate these topics. I suspect that very few, if any, scientists 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 science students not have the right to know and understand the nature of these debates, pursue questions further, and make up their own minds? If not, why not? If yes, how can a dialogue between science 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?

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.”³⁸ 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, says Archer, 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.”³⁹ 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, postmodernism, feminism, 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 must ensure their right to do so if they are so called. 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.

In summary, the opposite of, and cure for, sectarianism is not secularism but catholicity (small c), meaning universal, open to a consideration of all perspectives. There are both religious and secular versions of sectarianism and they *all* tend to squelch freedom of thought and inquiry.

Let me wrap up this essay by making a proposal. The one hundredth anniversary of the founding of the AAUP is coming up in 2015, as is the seventy-fifth anniversary of the AAUP's *1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure*. There will no doubt be many conferences on the state of academic freedom in higher education. As part of these anniversary reflections, I propose a nationwide conversation that reconsiders the academy's understanding of academic freedom—not because the AAUP *Statement* is wrong—it isn't—but because it is not yet complete. Here are three questions to provoke the national conversation:

1. The 1915 AAUP report on academic freedom stated that scholars must be free to pursue truth wherever it may lead them and to whatever extent they might come into conflict with accepted opinion. The term *accepted opinion* in 1915 referred primarily to traditional cultural norms and prevalent religious doctrines that impeded the progress of scholarship. But norms and doctrines sometimes change along with transformations in cultural and religious attitudes. There is no question that quite different “accepted opinions” reign in our academic culture today. Secularism is, to a great extent, enshrined in the academy. Various kinds of ideological sectarianisms dominate many humanities, science, and social science departments. My question then, is this: Should the AAUP reintroduce its core definition of 1915 and add the following italicized phrase: Academic freedom is the freedom of the scholar to pursue truth wherever it may lead or to whatever extent it might come into conflict with accepted opinion, *be that opinion religious, secular, or ideologically sectarian?*

2. Should the AAUP incorporate a new clause into its *Statement of Principles* stating that scholars who wish to pursue knowledge and truth beyond their discipline—drawing on theological insight—must be free to do so without censure or fear of losing their job so long as they demonstrate disciplinary competence? Should the AAUP investigate and censure institutions that violate this principle?
3. The US Supreme Court has ruled that public funds may go to religiously affiliated universities as long as those institutions are not *pervasively sectarian*,⁴⁰ that is, sectarian in a narrowly religious sense. In US jurisprudence, the term *sectarian* is synonymous with “religious,” for justified historical reasons. But much has changed, as I noted above. Sectarianism is no longer limited to dogmatic and authoritarian religious enterprises; it now includes secular scholarship and disciplinary orthodoxies of all kinds. If we decouple sectarianism and religion, and link sectarianism to any closed-minded, intolerant system, a question immediately arises: Should federal and state governments therefore also prohibit funding to *secular* sectarian institutions that prohibit the pursuit of truth into the theological realm?

These questions may seem rhetorically combative, but they are meant as friendly challenges intended to provoke serious discussion. Because here’s the thing: there are just too many pressing problems facing society today for us to be at odds on this, to not pool our knowledge and work together for the common good, perhaps even for the survival of humanity. No academic discipline is complete in itself; each explores only a portion of reality. Scholars from all disciplines must integrate their wisdom, listen to each other’s perspectives, and do so collegially to help solve humanity’s problems. The stakes of not collaborating, of a continuing mutual hostility, are just too high. Let us therefore take a new look at what academic freedom would mean if orthodoxies of all kind were 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.

Conclusion

The AAUP and other organizations have helped free scholarship from most religiously sectarian obstacles to academic freedom, but they have yet to free scholars within disciplines who want to transcend their disciplinary—and even interdisciplinary—boundaries to explore how theological insight might inform their field. This would not—and should not—preclude requiring scholars to demonstrate competence in their

field, but it would allow them to develop competence well beyond it, even to soar toward Shelley's "unseen Power" and Einstein's "highest wisdom."

As scholarship progresses, human understanding also evolves, broadens, and deepens; so too must our understanding, and practice, of the principle of academic freedom. An update of the AAUP *Statement*—and institutional statements on academic freedom—along the lines I suggest, would harm no one, would impose on no one, would free many, and would be intellectually stimulating and challenging to all open-minded scholars.

This essay is an expanded version of a presentation made at the forum on "Academic and Intellectual Freedom in Religiously Affiliated Universities" at the University of Notre Dame (April 15, 2013). Some of the material draws on the author's book, Academic Freedom and the Telos of the Catholic University (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

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Notes

¹ Philip Gleason, "Academic Freedom and the Crisis in Catholic Universities," in *Academic Freedom and the Catholic University*, ed. Edward Manier and John Houck (Notre Dame, IN: Fides, 1967), 48.

² Hunter Guthrie, S.J., *Tradition and Prospect: The Inauguration of the Very Reverend Hunter Guthrie, S.J.* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1949), 71–72.

³ Fairfield University, *Catalogue of the College of Arts and Sciences* 13, no. 1 (1959–60).

⁴ American Association of University Professors, "General Report of the Committee on Academic Freedom and Academic Tenure," *Bulletin of the American Association of University Professors* 1 (1915): 20; my emphasis.

⁵ From the opening line of a speech by Dawkins to the American Humanist Association accepting 1996 Humanist of the Year award; cited in Steve Paulson, "The Flying Spaghetti Monster," *Salon*, October 13, 2006, http://www.salon.com/2006/10/13/dawkins_3/, accessed March 27, 2014.

⁶ For a discussion of the effect of secular orthodoxies on faculty, see Mark U. Edwards, Jr., *Religion on Our Campuses: A Professor's Guide to Communities, Conflicts, and Promising Conversations* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), 111–17. For a discussion of faculty reticence to discuss religion seriously, see Mark U. Edwards Jr., "Why Faculty Find It Difficult to Talk about Religion," in *The American University in a Postsecular Age*, ed. Douglas Jacobsen and Rhonda Hustedt Jacobsen (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 82–88.

⁷ Kenneth Garcia, *Academic Freedom and the Telos of the Catholic University* (New York: Palgrave, 2012), 35–64.

⁸ Jon Roberts and James Turner, *The Sacred and the Secular University* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 86.

⁹ Dawkins, speech to American Humanist Association accepting 1996 Humanist of the Year award; my emphasis.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 27–28.

¹¹ Sidney Hook, *Heresy, Yes—Conspiracy No!* (New York: John Day, 1953), 154.

¹² Robert M. MacIver, *Academic Freedom in Our Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1955), 4.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 4, 285.

¹⁴ Stephen Jay Gould, *Rock of Ages: Science and Religion and the Fullness of Life* (New York: Ballantine, 1999), 6.

¹⁵ 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.

¹⁶ See, for example, <http://climatechange.nd.edu/>, accessed May 10, 2013.

¹⁷ John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982), 38.

¹⁸ Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith* (New York: Crossroads, 1984), 32.

¹⁹ Albert Einstein, *The World as I See It*, trans. Alan Harris (New York: Covici Friede, 1934), 242.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 267–68.

²¹ Albert Einstein, in *Living Philosophies* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1937), 6.

²² Albert Einstein, “Science and Religion,” in *Science, Philosophy, and Religion: A Symposium* (New York: Conference on Science, Philosophy, and Religion in Their Relation to the Democratic Way of Life, 1941), 211.

²³ Cited in Ronald Dworkin, “Religion without God,” in *New York Review of Books*, April 4, 2013, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2013/apr/04/religion-without-god/>.

²⁴ The following paragraph draws on García, *Academic Freedom*, chap. 7.

²⁵ John Polkinghorne, *Exploring Reality: The Intertwining of Science and Religion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), ix.

²⁶ In 2009, the Pew Research Center surveyed scientists who were members of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. The survey found that while 41 percent of the scientists did not believe in God, 33 percent of them did, and another 18 percent didn’t believe in God but did believe in a universal spirit or higher power (Einstein’s position). Elaine Ecklund and Christopher Scheitle found similar results in an earlier study of natural and social scientists at twenty-one elite US universities. These studies show that a sizable minority of believers toil alongside their nonbelieving peers in the ranks of academia. See Pew Research Center: Religion and Public Life Project, “Scientists and Belief,” November 5, 2009, 1–4 <http://www.pewforum.org/2009/11/05/scientists-and-belief/>. See also Elaine Howard Ecklund and Christopher P. Scheitle, “Religion among the Scientists: Distinctions, Disciplines, and Demographics,” *Social Problems* 54, no. 2 (May 2007): 289–307.

²⁷ See, for example, Stephen W. Hawking, *A Brief History of Time: From the Big Bang to Black Holes* (New York: Bantam, 1988), 131; and Paul Davies, *Cosmic Jackpot: Why Our Universe Is Just Right for Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2007), 6, 204.

²⁸ Davies, *Cosmic Jackpot*, 3.

²⁹ Cited in Ian G. Barbour, *When Science Meets Religion: Enemies, Strangers, or Partners* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2000), 29.

³⁰ Ian Barbour, *When Science Meets Religion*, 57.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 57–58.

³² *Ibid.*, 58. See also Davies, *Cosmic Jackpot*, 222–23.

³³ Cited in Barbour, *When Science Meets Religion*, 29–30.

³⁴ Freeman Dyson, “Science and Religion: No Ends in Sight,” *New York Review of Books*, March 28, 2002, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2002/mar/28/science-religion-no-ends-in-sight/>, accessed on March 31, 2014.

³⁵ 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.

³⁶ 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.

³⁷ Edward T. Oakes, “Complexity in Context: The Metaphysical Implications of Evolutionary Theory,” in *Fitness of the Cosmos for Life: Biochemistry and Fine-Tuning*, ed. John D. Barrow et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 65; Davies, *Cosmic Jackpot*, 223.

³⁸ Margaret S. Archer, Andrew Collier, and Douglas V. Porpora, *Transcendence: Critical Realism and God* (London: Routledge, 2004), 63.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁴⁰ *Tilton v. Richardson*, 403 U.S. 672 (1971); *Roemer v. Board of Public Works of Maryland*, 426 U.S. 736 (1976).