

Academic Freedom and Christian Scholarship
by Anthony Diekema. William
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Reviewed by Johan D. Tangelder.

Academic freedom, an integral aspect of a democratic society, is usually mentioned when there is a crisis. It is a supremely important subject to the academy in general and to Christian colleges and universities in particular. But like other freedoms, in practice academic freedom is constrained by often tacit conventions regarding its limits.

In his book Anthony J. Diekema, who served for twenty years a president of Calvin College, articulates and reflects on the extensive scholarly literature on this often misunderstood subject against the background of his own personal experiences on campus. He points to external and internal threats to academic freedom. He identifies rank relativism, the privatization of the Christian faith, and politically correct postmodernists as pervasive external threats. But he argues that the most devastating threats come "not from outside or from blatant tyranny, but rather from well-meaning persons who have little or no understanding of the long-range negative effect of their actions to inhibit the essential freedoms of the academy." He rightly states that the Christian community must allow its scholars to do their work. There should be room for real intellectual inquiry, honest questioning, and creativity. Christian colleges must provide the academic freedom necessary to protect their faculties from intimidation.

Diekema writes about the numerous attempts to silent Dr. Howard Van Till, the author of the highly controversial book *The Fourth Day*. Van Till was charged with blatantly violating the confessions and doctrinal positions. Diekema said that although representing a minority view, the negative critics were loud and lasting. A study committee report judged that Van Till's interpretations did not violate doctrinal and creedal standards.

It is not my intention to revisit the Van Till's story. But the language Diekema used to describe Van Till's critics is unwarranted. He writes about "a small radical fringe," and the usual tactics of the "zealots" who implemented: "emotionalized language, deception, innuendo, defamation of character, guilt by association, threats of withdrawal of financial support," and so on. He recognizes that both sides on the issue could have said things in a more courteous manner. He also believes that "religious feelings and convictions are deeply held." But I wonder whether he understood the legitimate concerns of Christian Reformed Church members who loved Calvin and considered it as "their school," for which they had also been asked to contribute their offerings. These members genuinely believed that Van Till's views undermined the Scripture as the trustworthy authority in matters of faith, morality, science and history.

What does academic freedom mean? In our postmodern times there is obviously no clear and widely accepted definition and even fewer consensus on, which its claims of violation may be assessed and adjudicated. Some say it means that no one can put limitations on either the professor or student without violating academic freedom. But freedom is not absolute and unlimited. Every educational institution has an identity and mission to which it must adhere. Absolute freedom is not freedom at all. It can only exist within the context

of restraints and higher values. Although many secular scholars carry on with their academic pursuits blissfully unaware of their biases, they still operate with some basic presuppositions. Diekema observes that an "unbiased, objective, ideology-free pursuit of knowledge is a transparent myth."

Secular scholars, therefore, should acknowledge that in the scholarly enterprise a worldview has a legitimate place. Diekema says that his own operating worldview was formed by the Reformed theology in the Dutch Calvinist tradition and by the theoretical works of the French sociologist Emile Durkheim during his graduate school days.

How does academic freedom function in a Christian college? Academic freedom at a Christian College is different from that at secular institutions. Christian educational institutions need to be up front about their rules and confessional standards. And these stated rules and confessional accountability should be enforced with enough flexibility to maximize academic freedom. Professors who choose to teach at a Christian- defined institution are not unduly restricted in their academic freedom. They, after all , have freely chosen to serve and honour the Lord within the constraints of the Scripture and Confessions. They are expected to accept responsibility not only to the academic community but also to the supporting faith community.

In this brief review I can't trace all of Diekema's arguments in detail. His book demands and deserves close reading.

Administrators, faculty members, and students at Christian educational institutions will greatly benefit from this important, well researched, and enriching contribution to the subject of the highly prized ideal of academic freedom.