
Guardians of the Word: Kirk, Buckley, and the Conservative Struggle with Academic Freedom

Luke Sheahan

The Catholic University of America

Introduction:

The Conservative Movement's Perpetual Civil War

The conflict between advocates of the free market and traditionalist conservatives dates from the beginning of the modern conservative movement. Never have traditionalists and classical liberals comfortably shared the same space. The differences and ensuing conflicts between these two strands within modern American conservatism have been well documented. In every area, whatever the potential for practical political alliances, differences emerge between the underlying philosophies that often produce irreconcilable policy prescriptions.

In the 1950s, just as the postwar conservative movement was beginning to coalesce around several key institutions, Russell Kirk, author of the 1953 bestseller *The Conservative Mind*, and Frank Meyer, *National Review's* book editor, famously sparred over the role of reason and tradition, freedom and community.¹ Meyer published a review of Kirk's *Conservative*

LUKE SHEAHAN is a doctoral candidate in politics at the Catholic University of America.

¹ See Jeffrey Hart, *The Making of the American Conservative Mind* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2005), ch. 4, and George Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 1976, 2006), 229, 244-46.

Mind titled "Collectivism Rebaptized" in the July 5, 1955, issue of *The Freeman*, accusing Kirk of putting a traditionalist gloss on the statist status quo.² Kirk responded in kind and the two exchanged invectives for the next several years. Kirk never allowed his name on *National Review's* masthead because he did not want his reputation associated with that of Meyer or others like him.³ Neither was convinced by the other and the conflict remains representative of the disagreements between the two schools of conservative thought.⁴

Conflict between Meyer and Kirk representative of continuing philosophical dispute.

Both factions have famously decried what both perceive as the stranglehold of the political and cultural left in academia. However, each has offered solutions based upon its own pre-suppositions. William F. Buckley's 1951 book *God and Man at Yale* is widely considered the standard for the conservative view of academic freedom. Buckley argues that academic freedom, as it exists in the academy, is a mirage to cover for indoctrination by tenured radicals. Universities are institutions funded by the public, either through the alumni if they are private or through taxes if they are public. But the inmates control the asylum; the radicals in the faculty control the universities, and it is incumbent upon the public at large and specifically university alumni and donors to rein them in.

God and Man at Yale made it to sixteenth place on the *New York Times* best-seller list and catapulted the twenty-five year old author into the public spotlight.⁵ Shortly thereafter he would agree to become the first president of the Intercollegiate Society of Individualists,⁶ now the Intercollegiate Studies Institute, and in 1955 he would launch the conservative movement's flagship magazine, *National Review*.⁷ Buckley would become arguably the most productive public intellectual of

² Hart, *American Conservative*, 41-2.

³ Hart, *American Conservative*, 41.

⁴ George Carey, *Freedom and Virtue: The Conservative/Libertarian Debate* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2004). Carey provides a representative selection of figures from various strains of twentieth-century conservatism on the relationship between conservatism and libertarianism. Selections from Meyer and Kirk are present as well as their contemporaries discussing the ensuing intellectual struggle.

⁵ Lee Edwards, *Educating for Liberty: The First Half-Century of the Intercollegiate Studies Institute* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 2003), 11.

⁶ Edwards, *Educating for Liberty*, 12.

⁷ Hart, *The Making of the American Conservative Mind*, 9.

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the twentieth century, publishing fifty-five books and 5,600 newspaper columns and hosting 1,429 episodes of *Firing Line*, in addition to giving hundreds of lectures around the world and publishing hundreds of prefaces, forewords, obituaries, and editorials.⁸ Through the magazine and his other endeavors Buckley was responsible for bringing together various strands of seemingly disparate and hostile intellectuals on the right and unifying them into a viable political movement.⁹ At its center was opposition to communism abroad and statism at home. The term “fusionism” described the tenuous alliance between traditionalists, libertarians, and various ex-leftists.¹⁰

Russell Kirk published *Academic Freedom: An Essay in Definition* in 1955, part of a life-long critique of higher education.¹¹ According to Buckley, Kirk’s role in the founding of both *National Review* and the American conservative movement at large was essential. Neither the magazine nor the movement would have existed without him.¹² Along with Buckley, “Kirk was the most prolific conservative author of the last century,”¹³ publishing over thirty books, over 2,000 articles, essays, and reviews in addition to thousands of columns for syndication.¹⁴

Kirk’s book on academic freedom received mixed reviews. Some saw it as a ground-breaking treatment of a difficult subject and a breath of fresh air in a debate mired in paranoid histrionics on one side and dogmatic denunciations of legitimate concerns on the other.¹⁵ Claude Hawley described Kirk’s take on academic freedom as “refreshing whether one agrees with him or not.”¹⁶ In a review in *The New York Times Book Review*,

⁸ George Nash, “Simply Superlative: Words for Buckley,” *National Review Online*, February 28, 2008. <http://www.nationalreview.com/articles/223788/simply-superlative/george-h-nash>

⁹ Nash, *Intellectual Movement*, 224.

¹⁰ Bruce Frohnen, Jeremy Beer, and Jeffrey O. Nelson, eds. *American Conservatism: An Encyclopedia*, (Wilmington, DE : ISI Books., 2006), 338-40.

¹¹ W. Wesley McDonald, *Russell Kirk and the Age of Ideology* (University of Missouri Press, Columbia and London, 2004).

¹² Gerald Russello, *The Postmodern Imagination of Russell Kirk* (University of Missouri Press: Columbia and London. 2007), 2.

¹³ Russello, *Postmodern*, 1.

¹⁴ *American Conservatism: An Encyclopedia*, 472.

¹⁵ Henry Regnery, *Memoirs of a Dissident Publisher* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), 162-64.

¹⁶ Claude E. Hawley, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and*

Roswell Ham noted that, while by the book title “it would seem to offer one more dry-as-dust disquisition” on academic freedom, the book actually is broad in scope and high in quality, making a significant contribution to the relevant discussion.¹⁷

Others were not so favorably inclined. Buckley denounced Kirk’s book in a review in the same issue of *The Freeman* that carried Meyer’s review of *The Conservative Mind*.¹⁸ He wrote that it “has something in it for everybody” and that “it can be justly quoted to defend virtually every consistent position in that controversy” over academic freedom. Buckley quickly realized that his review could very well repel Kirk from Buckley’s central enterprise, *National Review*. If Buckley was to have the young traditionalist scholar join his big-tent conservative effort, he would need to convince Kirk that he was on friendly terms with him despite their disagreements. Immediately upon publication, Buckley sent a copy of his review to Henry Regnery, whose publishing house published both Buckley’s and Kirk’s books, with a note saying,

I enclose a copy of my review of Russell Kirk’s last book, which you won’t like, nor will he. But I hope you both understand that it is done in context of a deep respect and friendliness for Russell Kirk. We simply happen to disagree fundamentally on this whole business of academic freedom.¹⁹

Buckley was right; Regnery didn’t like it. Kirk, who was with Regnery when he received the review and the note, read them and, according to Regnery, made no comment. Buckley was eventually able to meet with Kirk at his home in Mecosta and convince him to write a regular column for *National Review*.²⁰

This article will examine the differences between Buckley’s and Kirk’s views of academic freedom and how their justi-

Social Science, November 1955.

¹⁷ Roswell G. Ham, “The Search for Truths,” review in *The New York Times Book Review*, March 20, 1955.

¹⁸ William F. Buckley, “Essay in Confusion,” *The Freeman*, July 1955.

¹⁹ Carl T. Bogus, *Buckley: William F. Buckley, Jr. and the Rise of American Conservatism* (Bloomsbury Press, 2011), 109.

²⁰ While Kirk suspected that Meyer and Frank Chodorov, publisher of *The Freeman*, were conspiring against him (a copy of that issue of *The Freeman* was sent to potential supporters of a new journal Kirk was planning), he did not believe Buckley to be privy to the plot. Bogus, *Buckley*, 109-11, 364n45-46.

fications are derived from their fundamental understanding of religion, truth, and the human person at the heart of their respective philosophies. We shall pay special attention to how the underlying principles involved demonstrate a key difference between the free market conservatism of which Buckley was a proponent and the traditionalist conservatism of Russell Kirk.²¹

Buckley's 'Superstitions of Academic Freedom'

Buckley's *God and Man at Yale* burst on the academic scene with a storm of controversy. It was the time of Joseph McCarthy and the Red Scare. Professors at various institutions had been fired for communist sympathies. Buckley charged that Yale was teaching its students, if not outright communism, at least collectivism of a milder but no less deplorable sort and, what was at least as bad, irreligion. Economics professors denigrated capitalism and lauded state planning.²² Religion and humanities professors dismissed claims of orthodox religion and, at best, advocated a sort of vague moral ethics in place of doctrinal commitments.²³ From this initial introduction to Buckley's thought, it would seem that he had one foot firmly planted in the traditionalist camp, which was largely sympathetic to religion, and the other equally firmly planted

²¹ Most classical liberals chafe at the suggestion that Buckley is representative of their point of view, and many more deny that *God and Man at Yale* is representative of a libertarian view of academic freedom. Most libertarians embrace the laissez-faire educational view that Buckley decried and point out that it is self-described conservatives who generally subscribe to Buckley's views. Nevertheless, Buckley demonstrates one way in which free markets can be manifested in areas outside of the market itself to restrict and not to expand freedom. Kirk, on the other hand, demonstrates one area in which freedom is dependent upon inherited institutions and ideas and not on appeals to notions of individualism or market forces. At the very least, one could argue that academic freedom is only defensible if the institutional structure is such to allow it to exist in much the same way that the market is only workable within a context of the rule of law.

²² William F. Buckley, *God and Man at Yale* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 1986), Ch. 2, "Individualism at Yale." Buckley provides a convincing case that, indeed, Yale had abandoned the advocacy of free markets for the promotion of central state planning.

²³ Buckley, *God and Man*, Ch. 1, "Religion at Yale." Again, Buckley demonstrates that Yale's practice in the classroom differed considerably from what it preached to alumni, this time regarding religion.

in the free market camp.²⁴ However, his argument regarding academic freedom demonstrates that his assumptions draw largely from his economic leanings and not from tradition or religion.

Buckley was deeply influenced by Yale's own Willmoore Kendall, a political scientist of some stature who advocated a theory of "absolute majoritarianism," which meant that for society to endure a "public orthodoxy" must be enforced. "The truth of Christianity and free enterprise, Buckley argued, had been established by history and tradition."²⁵ Therefore, it was the role of a great and influential institution to enforce those values. Civilization depended on it.

For Kendall and Buckley, civilization depended on enforcing a "public orthodoxy."

The professors Buckley castigates as betraying that mission claimed the protections of academic freedom. Buckley argues that the "superstitions of academic freedom" were mere smoke and mirrors to distract from Yale's teaching students a different kind of orthodoxy than the one that it claimed to provide. Every institution already limited what it allowed professors to teach as a necessity of good pedagogy. Buckley writes,

I believe it to be an indisputable fact that most colleges and universities, and certainly Yale, the protests and pretensions of their educators and theorists notwithstanding, do not practice, cannot practice, and cannot even believe what they say about education and academic freedom.²⁶

For example, everyone acknowledged that some pieces of literature were superior to others. No one objected when certain poets were left off of the reading list and others were included.²⁷ It was understood that there were good poets and there were bad poets; the former ought to be taught and the latter ought not to be taught. Limits necessarily exist. Buckley only advocated that those limits be narrowed to exclude all but free market economics and Christian moral and theological views.²⁸

Yale claimed to be a champion of capitalism and Christianity to its sympathetic alumni, but it provided a different sort of education in the classroom. Administrators told the

²⁴ Nash, *Intellectual Movement*, 121.

²⁵ *American Conservatism: An Encyclopedia*, 352.

²⁶ Buckley, *God and Man*, 131.

²⁷ Buckley, *God and Man*, 132.

²⁸ Buckley, *God and Man*, 136.

alumni what the alumni wanted to hear to solicit donations and then promulgated contrary values, a situation described by Buckley as Yale's "twilight zone of hypocrisy with respect to her alumni."²⁹ Buckley called on the Yale alumni to exert control over the faculty and to make sure that Yale remained an institution that upheld the principles that alumni held dear, namely, Christianity and capitalism.

For Buckley, establishing a university curriculum a matter of power.

Buckley describes his position as a stand against "laissez-faire education," against the "proposition that 'all sides should be presented impartially,' that the student should be encouraged to select the side that pleases him most."³⁰ At the same time, he advocates a different type of laissez-faire education, one in which the powerful moneyed interests involved with the respective university are able to determine what ideological direction the university takes. For Buckley, establishing a university curriculum is a matter of power. Alumni should exert force through their pecuniary means to have their own ideas propagated.

Buckley's argument can be summed up thus: "The alumni, as the purchasers and consumers of Yale's product, and as the supporters of Yale through their contributions, deserved the same sovereignty as did the consumer in the marketplace."³¹ Just as money determines which products are produced in the marketplace, so should money decide which subjects are promulgated in the academy. Wealthy Yale alumni should guard the truth with their pocketbooks by forcing Yale to uphold the orthodoxies on which civilization depends. Professors at Yale would be required to swear loyalty to Yale's mission and to advance it in their teaching and research. Only on that basis could they be employed at Yale.

Within the limits of capitalism and Christianity, Buckley would still allow freedom of inquiry. But the general thrust of the educational project would restrict such freedom.

Free enterprise can and should be examined, criticized, and fashioned from the heart of an institution nevertheless dedicated, until something better comes along, to preserving its general outline. Similarly no one can criticize a Christian whose allegiance and devotion to his faith lead him to criticize

²⁹ Buckley, *God and Man*, 109.

³⁰ Buckley, *God and Man*, lxvii.

³¹ *American Conservatism*, 352.

and to seek to reform the temporal ritualistic or even organic inadequacies of his religion.³²

Freedom to criticize would stop at the freedom to challenge capitalism or Christianity to its core. It would only allow “constructive criticism” that sought to eliminate deficiencies in the manifestations of these values.

Buckley defends his requirements on the basis that Yale is influential in molding the values and thinking of not only its students³³ but, through the powerful positions its distinguished alumni often occupy, society at large.³⁴ Alumni have a duty to interfere in the affairs of the university they love for the sake of the ideals they believe to be immutably true.³⁵ When faced with the great and defining questions of the age, Buckley argues that Yale cannot fail to take a stand for the right side. If the alumni are convinced that in the struggle between capitalism and socialism capitalism is the right side, then they must force Yale to take a stand for capitalism. The same applies in the struggle between Christianity and atheism.³⁶

Kirk’s ‘Guardians of the Word’

Russell Kirk’s *Academic Freedom: An Essay in Definition* offers a defense of the maligned institution of academic freedom. Written partially in response to Buckley, but also to other threats, Kirk’s book appeals to the nature of the academic enterprise as a search for truth, the history of academic freedom in the Western universities, and the proper role of free discourse in society. His *Canons of Conservatism*, as outlined in the introductory chapter of *The Conservative Mind*, emerge

³² Buckley, *God and Man*, 156.

³³ Buckley, *God and Man*, 103.

³⁴ Buckley, *God and Man*, 174.

³⁵ Buckley, *God and Man*, 104.

³⁶ Buckley, *God and Man*, lxvi. Buckley sees these conflicts as related. “I myself believe that the duel between Christianity and atheism is the most important in the world. I further believe that the struggle between individualism and collectivism is the same struggle reproduced on another level.” Alumni of other institutions would, of course, have the right and duty to pressure those institutions into implementing similar policies to make sure that the ideals they consider to be immutably true are advanced. By the same token, the minority of Yale alumni who believe socialism to be the truest and best economic system or who believe atheism to be the truest expression of ultimate beliefs should not support Buckley’s Yale.

throughout his discussion to demonstrate the application of his traditionalist conservatism to academic freedom. We will occasionally utilize Kirk's extensive literature on academic freedom in addition to this book to elucidate his thoughts.

Conservatives, Kirk writes, believe "in a transcendent moral order, or body of natural law, which rules society as well as conscience."³⁷ Man's search for the ground of existence is a search of eternal significance. State authority cannot dictate it and popular opinion cannot restrain it. The search itself finds its justification outside the needs or wants of state and society. New York University Professor Sidney Hook had argued for unfettered academic freedom on the basis that society benefits from such an institution: "The justification of academic freedom must lie in its fruits."³⁸ However, this places the practice of academic freedom at the mercy of the public's determination that the search, as conducted by the university, is worth the privileges the public grants to it. Kirk describes Professor Hook's view: "If, then, the academy either fails to accomplish its educational goals, or if it violates other moral values more weighty than academic freedom, the community does right to abridge academic freedom."³⁹

Kirk argues in response to Professor Hook that the justification for academic freedom does not lie mainly in its fruits. The Academy is part of the community and the fruits of its endeavors do benefit the community. But "it also exists for its own sake, and more especially for the sake of private wisdom and private needs."⁴⁰ Plato's Academy was not founded *by* the public or *for* the public. It was founded by private persons "to enable them to pursue the Truth without being servants of an evanescent community."⁴¹ The Academy often found itself at odds with the political notions of democratic Athens. But it found its sanction not in its support for transient political causes, but rather in the spirit of Socrates' search for the examined life. "Higher learning is intended to work upon the

For Kirk, the state cannot dictate and popular opinion cannot restrain the search for truth.

Higher learning exists for the sake of the person.

³⁷ Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Eliot* (Washington, DC: Henry Regnery Company, 1953, 1985), 8.

³⁸ Quoted in Russell Kirk, *Academic Freedom: An Essay in Definition* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1955), 11.

³⁹ Kirk, *Academic Freedom*, 10.

⁴⁰ Kirk, *Academic Freedom*, 11.

⁴¹ Kirk, *Academic Freedom*, 12.

individual human reason and imagination, for the person's own sake."⁴²

The medieval universities, of which our own are direct descendants,⁴³ also had unprecedented freedom, especially compared to other groups in medieval society. While there is not a direct historical lineage between Plato's Academy and the medieval universities, they both were animated by the idea that the search for truth was sacred. "The philosopher, the scholar, and the student were looked upon as men consecrated to the service of Truth,"⁴⁴ and thus they were granted freedom necessary to the pursuit.

Kirk calls the scholar the "Guardian of the Word." He is the sacred standard bearer for transcendent reality. While the university remained a religious institution, its religion did not stifle the search but made the search possible. The transcendent horizon toward which their religious convictions compelled them enticed the medieval schoolmen to the search. The foundational belief that it was the Word that they sought made them loathe to relinquish their freedom to any worldly power. Thus discussions in medieval universities were vigorous and free.

[Scholars were] free from external interference and free from stifling internal conformity, because the whole purpose of the universities was the search after an enduring truth, beside which worldly aggrandizement was as nothing.⁴⁵

For these medieval Guardians of the Word freedom of its discussion was inherent in the absoluteness of truth. The scholar pursues universal Truth, but he is hesitant to deny that there is variety in its particular manifestations. In the same way, he is hesitant to contend that Truth could be exhausted in any specific expression. The inexhaustible nature of eternal truth demands that it will find various expressions that finite human minds will only ever be able partially to comprehend. Given

Academic freedom exists for the exploration of truth's particular manifestations.

⁴² Russell Kirk, *Decadence and Renewal in the Higher Learning: An Episodic History of American University and College Since 1953* (Peru, IL: Serwood Sugden & Company, Publishers, 1988), 16.

⁴³ Many of the early American universities were founded to train clergy. Even public institutions often had religious beginnings. A founder of the University of Michigan was a Roman Catholic priest and its first president, Henry Philip Tappan, insisted on the centrality of religion to higher education. Kirk, *Academic Freedom*, 20.

⁴⁴ Kirk, *Academic Freedom*, 17.

⁴⁵ Kirk, *Academic Freedom*, 18.

the limitations of human beings, there is a certain irreducible variety in the way in which truth will express itself in finite human existence. Academic freedom exists for the exploration of these various possibilities. In a way, this is a confirmation of Kirk's second Canon of Conservatism regarding conservatives' "affection for a proliferating variety and mystery of human existence."

Academic freedom has existed as a custom. It is rarely a matter of law but rather of long practice. It is not ordained by higher legal authority, although it may be a matter of contract, but sanctioned by long human experience. It is "the enduring idea of a special liberty, or body of liberties, that is attached to the academic institution, the teacher, and the scholar."⁴⁶ Custom prescribes academic freedom for the academy and for the scholar. Man's experience with transcendent truth over the centuries has produced the concept of inherited freedom, passed on because it embodies truth regarding the nature of man's relationship to transcendent Truth.

Truth is higher than any temporal authority.

Truth is higher than any temporal authority. The importance of the freedom to learn and the freedom to teach emerged from the experience of scholars pursuing truth. It was the self-conscious fact of that search that sanctioned their freedom in the pursuit. This is the purpose for which scholars banded together against encroachment and the reason that they vigorously contested every point among themselves. If truth is at stake, no merely temporal political concerns could stand in the way. This experience galvanized the concept of the freedom of the academy in the Western mind.⁴⁷ Scholars were servants to no one but Truth itself.

Education exists "to develop the character and talents of individuals."

In an important sense, the role of the scholar is aristocratic. He sits aloof from society, pursuing his inquiries apart from social concerns. Education exists "to develop the character and talents of individuals" that they might perceive truth more clearly. This is an end in itself and does not require the sanction of social approval. Universities have existed through the rise and fall of political orders. Their freedom exists for the sake of their search, not for the sake of society.

The principal importance of academic freedom is the oppor-

⁴⁶ Kirk, *Academic Freedom*, 3.

⁴⁷ Kirk, *Academic Freedom*, 36.

tunity it affords for the highest development of private reason and imagination, the improvement of mind and heart by the apprehension of Truth, whether or not that development is of any immediate use to [society].⁴⁸

This does not mean that society does not benefit from such an institution. Individuals endowed with cognitive perspicuity and moral bearing are essential. Kirk argued that a natural aristocracy was necessary for any society. Education did not exist to provide all men with a mediocre education but rather to develop to an extraordinary degree “the character and talents of individuals” who would offer ethical leadership each in his own sphere of influence.⁴⁹ Additionally, society is in need of people who can discuss dangerous issues without fear of reprisal.

The theory of academic freedom is that the search after Truth involves certain risks: for Truth is not always popular in the marketplace, and there are opinions and fields of speculation that cannot prudently be discussed in the daily press or in the public meetings.⁵⁰

This is an application of Kirk’s third Canon of Conservatism: “civilized society requires orders and classes,” each attending to its own affairs but providing disinterested and appropriate criticisms of the others. “Society as a whole benefits from the contributions of persons of elevated intellect and good character.”⁵¹ The aloofness and rights of the academy provide it with a vantage point and freedom to offer society the very criticism without which it would stagnate. Kirk writes, “[T]he professor has the right, and even the duty, to criticize his age.”⁵² The call of the scholar is one that society requires because it needs the pursuit of transcendent Truth to imbue it with purpose and enliven its higher imagination.

“The professor has the right, and even the duty, to criticize his age.”

This function serves society, but it is not at the service of society. Society recognizes the importance and unique call of the Guardians of the Word, but it does not give the search for truth its sanction. “The community did not create these privileges of the Academy, any more than the community created wisdom;

⁴⁸ Kirk, *Academic Freedom*, 27.

⁴⁹ McDonald, *Ideology*, 174-75.

⁵⁰ Russell Kirk, *The Intemperate Professor and Other Cultural Splenetics* (South Bend, IN: Gateway Editions, 1978), 7.

⁵¹ McDonald, *Ideology*, 175.

⁵² Kirk, *Intemperate Professor*, 19.

rather, the community simply recognized the justice of the Academy's claim to privilege."⁵³

This concern becomes especially clear when Kirk criticizes what he takes to be the educational theories of John Dewey. Dewey advocated a utilitarian education aimed at producing good democratic citizens. Whatever society needed, universities should provide it.⁵⁴ Higher education becomes little more than a vocational school, and worse, a means of indoctrination in the values of the ruling regime. Education is degraded to "recreation, socialization, and a kind of custodial jurisdiction over young people."⁵⁵ Explicating Kirk's views, Wesley McDonald writes,

John Dewey . . . argued that education should inculcate the civic virtues of duty and responsibility to ensure their obedience and loyalty to the regime The interests of the state or the collective interests of society take precedence over the concerns and interests of the person.⁵⁶

If this becomes the basis of education, then academic freedom cannot and should not exist. If education need only exist for the support of certain dogmas then learning is little more than indoctrination in those tenets. Teachers do not require freedom to explore and to challenge, to push their students into higher ways of thinking. Teachers in these schools are not "scholars" in any meaningful sense, and if they behave like indoctrinators they will lose their freedom. Kirk writes, "Having proved derelict in their duty of guiding the minds and hearts of mankind, the inhabitants of such an academy will be deprived of their academic freedom."⁵⁷

While academic freedom is independent of society, it is the means of preserving a natural aristocracy, those Guardians of the Word on which society depends. Truth is the sanction for freedom's existence. When the academy fails to preserve the true scholar, he who pursues the truth apart from social approval, the freedom of the academy will lose its sanction for existence.

In some ways, the utilitarian educational vision that domi-

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sanction for
freedom's
existence.*

⁵³ Kirk, *Academic Freedom*, 17-18.

⁵⁴ McDonald, *Ideology*, 182.

⁵⁵ Kirk, *Academic Freedom*, 45.

⁵⁶ McDonald, *Ideology*, 198.

⁵⁷ Kirk, *Academic Freedom*, 44.

nates the academy does not differ that much from Buckley's. Both have an idea of orthodoxy that can be inculcated for the service of the regime. For Dewey, as understood by Kirk, the regime was progressive democracy, and for Buckley, Christianity and the market system. Dewey envisioned a democratic society quite different from Buckley's, but both nonetheless believed that education was the means of establishing a vision of society based upon certain dogmas. Dewey's utilitarian instructors and Buckley's orthodox instructors are not modeled on the old clerisy, sanctioned by the search for truth, but employees of the majority, whatever it may be. But each hoped that it would establish their favored regime.⁵⁸

The University Today: Freedom for Sophists?

We have been emphasizing the way in which academic freedom exists to protect the rights of true philosophers, Guardians of the Word. However, the academy also has its sophists. Buckley spends a great deal of his book castigating preachers of untruth and, as said, arguing that they be removed from Yale. In his review of Kirk's book, Buckley writes that Kirk "blandly assumes that all teachers are scholars engaged in searching out truth." But Kirk explicitly recognizes the presence of sophists in the academy. His opposition to Buckley's prescriptions stems from his fear that, if the sophists were to be rooted out, a great many philosophers would be rooted out with them. There are still true philosophers who take the scholarly vocation seriously and pursue the truth with dignity and integrity. Academic freedom exists for these scholars, but it must also be applied to the sophists. "It is only out of concern for the Philosophers that the Sophists are tolerated in their license."⁵⁹

Sophists must be tolerated for the sake of the philosophers.

With protection for the task of the philosopher comes protection for the sophist as well. Indeed, "it is part of the duty of the philosopher to preserve freedom in the Academy even for the sophist."⁶⁰ The sophists, who disdain the search for truth

⁵⁸ For a contrasting interpretation of Dewey's philosophy, see Seth Vannatta, "Pragmatic Conservatism: A Defense," *Humanitas*, Vol. 25, Nos. 1&2 (2012), 20-43.

⁵⁹ Kirk, *Academic Freedom*, 189.

⁶⁰ Kirk, *Academic Freedom*, 185.

for the pursuit of power, cannot be relied upon to defend freedom when it is truly under attack. They have a tendency to defend freedom when it benefits them, to flee or join the attackers when it does not.

Kirk did not advocate freedom for all. He believed that there were limits inherent in the practice of academic freedom. When Kirk's *Academic Freedom* was published, the McCarthy investigations were still fresh in the public mind. Many feared the influence of communists in the universities. Many liberals, including Professor Hook, asserted that communists, when found on the faculty, should be fired immediately. Kirk sided with the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) in arguing that known Communists should not be hired but that tenured Communists should be left alone. Whatever the dangers presented by bad ideas such as communism, it is at least as dangerous to meddle with the prescriptive rights of academic freedom as preserved in the practice of tenure. Removing tenured Communists could very well prove a pyrrhic victory, losing the war over a long held principle for short-term ideological gain. At any rate, both decisions must be left to the university as an institution and not be imposed from outside.⁶¹

If the university is not sectarian, if it is private and non-denominational or public, it should allow the widest range of opinion possible. The conservative, the liberal, and even the radical have a place in the Academy. Indeed, Kirk writes, it "would be a dull and unhealthy place if such variety did not exist."⁶² The role of the Academy is inherently conservative, preserving what is best of the bank and capital of ages. However, it is also liberal. Change is the means of our preservation. The reality of eternal Truth must be brought to bear on changing circumstances. So, "both the conservative bent and the liberal bent should not only be tolerated, but encouraged. If there were no liberals, we should find it necessary to invent some; if there were no conservatives—but perish that thought."⁶³

The role of the Academy is inherently conservative—and also liberal.

⁶¹ Kirk, *Academic Freedom*, 157. Kirk is not conceding Buckley's point that institutions should enforce their own dogmas but recognizing that each institution will have to make its own decisions about how best to preserve academic freedom in the particular struggles each encounters.

⁶² Kirk, *Academic Freedom*, 159.

⁶³ Kirk, *Academic Freedom*, 159.

Buckley and Kirk Compared

Buckley desired that Yale promulgate Christianity and individualism. For him, “[t]he primary goal of education was to familiarize students with an existing body of truth, of which Christianity and free enterprise or individualism were the foundation.”⁶⁴ In a sense, however, Kirk’s traditionalist approach takes religion and the individual more seriously.

To Buckley’s claim of establishing a Christian orthodoxy at Yale, Kirk responded that the nature of Christianity is such that, in order for its promulgation to be effective, it must be free. “Such an attempt to make up men’s minds about [these principles] by indoctrination would be the worst possible way to accomplish the desired end. Faith, like love, cannot be forced.”⁶⁵ Christianity should not be coerced for the sake of Christianity. At best, coercion can foster the thin allegiance of a seed sprouting in shallow soil, at worst, distrust and resentment.

In his review of Kirk’s book, Buckley objects that Kirk’s use of “the Word” was so vague as to be entirely unhelpful. Buckley asks in exasperation, “What Word? The Word of Christ?” Kirk apparently thought so, although, according to Buckley, that would leave out skeptics such as Sidney Hook, who Buckley calls “a persistent God-baiter.” Buckley argues that the defense of academic freedom on the basis that university teachers defend truth is only credible if truth is identified and those who defend falsehood are justly censored. Buckley acknowledges that Kirk seems to be defending “the search for truth, rather than the dissemination of it.” At the same time, however, Kirk “believes in the truth and its discoverability.” If this is the case, Buckley asks, “Shouldn’t students be indoctrinated in the Word?”⁶⁶

The role of Guardian of the Word requires freedom to pursue Truth on its own terms, which cannot be externally dictated. For Kirk, truth is absolute, but it is also larger than any one formulation of it. To put it another way, human beings, limited as they are by finite knowledge, will be perpetually refining and reformulating their understanding of truth. “The

⁶⁴ Edwards, *Educating for Liberty*, 12.

⁶⁵ Kirk, *Academic Freedom*, 121.

⁶⁶ Buckley, “Essay in Confusion.”

Word," in order to be grasped, must be sought. Capturing transcendent and eternal notions in immanent language will always require struggle and always encounter limitations and remain in some sense deficient. Thus, Kirk argues, pursuit of the Word cannot be coerced. This is not an argument against the immutability of truth, but an acknowledgment of the finite and tenuous nature of human existence. It is at heart an argument from humility, recognizing the transcendent glory of truth, on the one hand, and, on the other, the limited ability of human beings to grasp it.

While Buckley may be right about the truths of Christianity, and many conservatives believe that he is, the nature of the academy as the place where Truth is pursued by the Guardians of the Word requires that the pursuit of such things be free. Religion provided the genesis of this historical prescription, and its assumptions underlie it still. To play the role of mere propagator of principles, Yale would do a grand disservice to the very principles Buckley would have it promulgate. The best religious colleges grant a wide degree of academic freedom despite their doctrinal commitments, or perhaps, Kirk thinks, because of them.⁶⁷

Buckley and Kirk also differed in their understanding of the individual. Kirk's individual is a social being uniquely endowed with the potential for high imaginative and intellectual achievement. Kirk did not believe in an undifferentiated mass of individuals. Persons of differing talents and characters and even classes populate a society. It is to a certain class that academic freedom pertains. The persons in that class do not serve the state or society or orthodoxy, but truth as a transcendent value rising above the social and political conditions in which the person works.

Buckley would have students taught dogmas of religion and the market in a top-down manner that precludes the enlivening discussion that such creeds should engender. While he points out that many professors are sophists, claiming the protections of academic freedom as cover for their own schemes of indoctrination, he ignores the possibility that the sophists' deformation of academic freedom is not its real essence. The

⁶⁷ Kirk, *Academic Freedom*, 121-22.

educated person in Buckley's scheme would not be significantly better off than the product of utilitarian training. There is a servile aspect to both that renders education little more than vocational training for the sake of society.

The conservative may prefer Buckley's aims to those of utilitarianism, but the means chosen by Buckley violate his own religious and individualist pretensions. Homogeneous instruction in the tenets of individualism creates servile automatons, not liberally educated individuals. For Kirk, the individual is not the imitation of a model but a person. He makes room for the higher imagination in each person and respects the diversity and dignity of individuals. His academic arrangement is beneficial to society but because it recognizes that society is a community of persons.

Buckley's market-based argument arrives at a conception of the pursuit of truth that is reduced to an assertion of power by moneyed interests, as long as they are the *right* moneyed interests. Kirk approaches academic freedom from an historical point of view, taking seriously the role religion has played in establishing academic freedom and the nature of the persons who claim its protections. What emerges is a more robust, historically grounded conception of higher education than one given over to the vicissitudes of the market. For who is to say what powerful alumni will want tomorrow?

Conclusion

Defending himself against charges of authoritarianism in reviews of his book, Buckley explains in the introduction to the twenty-fifth anniversary edition that he was arguing for the institutional freedom of the academy, not individual freedom within a given academy. Individuals of course would be free to attend whichever institution they favored. Such a scheme is hardly authoritarian in the sense in which the reviewers made comparisons to Nazi Germany. His point was made adequately clear in the original text, and many of his reviewers exaggerated the scope of the censorship that he supported.

However, Buckley does not allow that freedom could exist to a meaningful extent within the academy itself. There would simply be socialist universities and capitalist universities, atheist universities and Christian universities, each with its

For Buckley, the mission of each university is to propagate a set of dogmas.

own orthodoxy and each with its own accompanying speech code and teaching guidelines tailored to support the respective university's mission. The university's mission is the propagation of a set of beliefs that it teaches to its students. The specific dogma of an institution is the reason students attend a particular institution and the reason alumni support it. Without that dogma, the university is adrift. Buckley writes, "At the private college, the sense of mission is distinguishing. It is, however, strangled by what goes under the presumptuous designation of academic freedom. It is a terrible loss, the loss of the sense of mission. It makes the private university, sad to say, incoherent."⁶⁸

For Kirk, the university's mission is to uphold the search for truth for its own sake.

Buckley ignores the possibility that the mission of a university might not be the propagation of a dogma, but the search for truth. Such a mission would necessitate academic freedom. He discounts the possible existence of an institution that upholds the search for truth for its own sake, as the purpose of its existence. Kirk's conception of the scholar as Guardian of the Word described in his book would not have been meaningful within Buckley's scheme. An enforced orthodoxy does not allow for the sort of aloof thinkers that Kirk has in mind, abiding beyond public censorship and protected by what amounts to a sort of aristocratic privilege.

If the university's mission is the search for truth, the trustees of the university are wise to heed the inheritance of academic freedom. If they treat their professors like hired hands, they are likely to act like hired hands, with all the vices that entails. Rather, Kirk writes, trustees "ought to look upon the scholar and the teachers as persons who have honored the university by consenting to give that institution the benefit of their wisdom, ordinarily serving for a salary that is really simply an honorarium."⁶⁹

Otherwise boards of trustees ought to prepare to pay their servants well. If their professors are to be mere hired hands, it is best to make them well-paid hired hands.⁷⁰ The danger of placing the work of the scholar at the mercy of the community is that, if the scholar is treated like a servant, he begins to act

⁶⁸ Buckley, *God and Man*, lviii.

⁶⁹ Kirk, *Academic Freedom*, 120.

⁷⁰ Kirk, *Academic Freedom*, 120.

like a servant. He works to please his masters. This is not without justice. If professors are mere employees of an institution with an ideological mission, then it follows that they must work for that mission.

The primary difference between Kirk and Buckley is that Buckley sees in academic freedom only a dissembling mechanism used effectively by the left and the irreligious to conceal the true power struggles in academia.⁷¹ Hence he argues that conservatives must tear the mask off that struggle and assert their own power. Kirk defends the pursuit of what is higher in human life than base material existence, including temporal power in the academy. It is possible for an institution to protect the search for truth for its professors as Guardians of the Word. Kirk does not deny that many professors use academic freedom to cover their own indoctrination efforts just as Buckley decries.⁷² But all that is not naked power is not necessarily dissembling rhetoric. There can be a place where the mind and the higher imagination are cultivated in a spirit of prescriptive freedom, where a community of scholars pursues truth in its particular manifestations without hindrance. This is the dignity of the academy that is inherited from humanity's long search for truth, and it still enlivens the philosophers in its midst. This is Russell Kirk's conservative vision of academic freedom.

A place for cultivating the higher imagination in a spirit of prescriptive freedom.

⁷¹ Edwards, *Liberty*, 50-53.

⁷² Kirk, *Academic Freedom*, 161-62.

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