THE HISTORY OF ACADEMIC FREEDOM

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The idea of academic freedom that exists in our American universities today emanates from centuries of colorful and occasionally tragic history. This history forms the foundations and framework of the laws and regulations that govern our higher institutions today. The modern idea of academic freedom has evolved by the wisdom and sacrifices of great teachers from before the time of Socrates, and continues to be transformed today by men and women who are dedicated to finding truth in all things.

Although it was once believed that all medieval scientists were persecuted by the church, today “creative tension” is felt to be a more accurate characterization of that time period (Bede’s). The Middle Ages, roughly 1066 to 1500, in Paris and Bologna was the beginning of the previously unknown notion of the university as a powerful, prestigious, autonomous, and self-governing learning center (Hofstadter, 1955). It was a great privilege to be a student or teacher at the university. They were treated as clergymen under the law, which meant they had a high level of immunity to secular justice. Any actions taken within the university were rarely known on the outside (Bede’s). Thus began the academic and scientific transformation of Europe.

Sons of laymen and clergymen were the only patrons of Bologna’s early center for the study of civil law. It was highly touted and soon became the model for the Italian, Spanish and Portuguese universities. The Paris masters and students were clerics at the center of theological studies and art. Most German universities, and the two English universities, Oxford and Cambridge, patterned themselves after the University of Paris (Hofstadter, 1955). Lynn Thorndike (1915) remarked that there seems no adequate
proof for a single specific instance of persecution of men of science by the church for purely scientific views in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

Upon entering the period we refer to as the Renaissance, the world changed drastically. The printing press was actually invented around 1456. The scope of its value by the end of the Middle Ages is impossible to figure. The period of enlightenment, the Renaissance, may never have happened without it. In addition, the world opened up to traders who traveled the globe. The church had lost its hold on western culture and there began a true renaissance in thinking and art. However, it was during this period, “. . . in which the university system was taking form, the attitude of the Church was growing much harsher.” (Hofstadter, 1955, p. 13)

From the early fourteenth century forward, there developed a fundamental division between those who focused on the senses, reason, and natural knowledge, and opposed those who focused on faith and revelation (Hofstadter, 1955). Toward the end of the fourteenth and into the fifteenth century, the Italian universities became full of the scientific teachings that had been popular at Oxford and Paris, and also at Prague and Heidelberg. In Paris, the old masters were gone and their power that had once been associated with the creativity of its teachers was entirely focused on traditional and established faith and its ability to limit the freedom of others. Hofstadter goes on to say that although France’s Louis XI did much toward education of the masses, his reign almost completely defeated the autonomy the university had enjoyed in the period of the Renaissance. The university was no longer independent but existed only by the tolerance of the kings.
The Italian universities took over academic leadership. By the middle of the fifteenth century, the first great generation of Greek teachers and philosophers had already passed (Hofstadter, 1955). During the age of Renaissance popes, a remarkable degree of latitude was given to some Italian thinkers. The threat of the Inquisition existed, but there was still widespread freedom of thought for some well-connected philosophers. “But while the Italian universities were allowed to continue their philosophical work, most intellectual work in universities elsewhere was again substantially reduced.” (Hofstadter, 1955, p. 44)

The Inquisition of the Catholic Church had its effects on academic liberties when in February of 1600, the bold and brilliant Italian philosopher and scientist, Giordano Bruno was burned at the stake for his so-called crime of heresy. Bruno had long been considered a martyr to scientific truth (Gaglioti, 2000, p. 1). Gaglioti went on to say that Bruno was a complex figure who vigorously taught reason and logic. Bruno earned the admiration of the most advanced thinkers of the period and the loathing of the church. He spent his life until his capture wandering Europe discussing and promoting his philosophical ideas.

Bruno traveled extensively, not only to share his philosophy but also to avoid being imprisoned for his theories and teaching. Genius and originality of thought were not enough to provide a secure future for a scholar. His burning in 1600 marks the turning point from official indifference or liberality to persecution (Hofstadter, 1955). Tension increased between the brilliant minds of the era and those who were in power. In 1610, as soon as Galileo had published his *Sidereus nuncios*, which reported his telescopic observations, he was listed as a suspect in the secret books of the
Inquisition. Although an appeal was made, it was denied and Galileo received a life sentence (The Galileo Project).

The Modern Age dates roughly from the seventeenth century forward. This is approximately when the concept and practice of academic freedom as we recognize it in Western civilization began.

We think of the seventeenth century as a century of genius, of great advances in all branches of science, of brilliant philosophy and liberal theology. Most of university life was still limited by the medieval curriculum, the Latin language, and Greek thought. Freedom of thought was not practiced. (Hofstadter, 1955, p. 60)

America saw the emergence of new forms of educational control, principally for religious diversity but also because they sought a better way of life. The Puritans had already established that every child should have a chance to learn to read the Scriptures. They understood the importance of an education and tried to see that all children were education. However, not everyone agreed:

But I thank God, there are no free schools nor printing, and I hope we shall not have these for a hundred years, for learning has brought disobedience, and heresy, and sects into the world, and printing has divulged them, and libels against the best government. God keep us from both! (Rippa, 1976, p. 26)

The Puritans did not accept scientific knowledge, and they promoted political intolerance. “In a society where religious freedom is allowed but where education must be religious, a common public school system for all children is well nigh impossible.” (Butts, 1953, p. 98) Education was difficult at best in colonial America because of difficulty of travel and diversity of beliefs. However, by 1791, when the First Amendment was ratified, the idea of freedom of speech had become the cornerstone of
Academic Freedom 6

the amendment. Freedom of the press was added so that written, printed and oral communication was protected.

During the first half of the twentieth century, academic freedom was recognized broadly in most Western countries (Brickman, 1994). However, infringements of the right increased in many countries, especially in Germany, Italy, and the Soviet Union. In the Soviet Union academic freedom was limited by making all instruction and research conform to Communist doctrines. Brickman goes on to state that many infringements of academic freedom also occurred in the United States in the twentieth century. One of the most publicized challenges was the Scopes trial, where a high school teacher was accused and convicted of violating a state law that forbid the teaching of the theory of evolution in public schools. After World War II, the right of the United States Congress to question teachers about their membership in the Communist party was upheld by the U. S. Supreme Court (Brickman, 1994). The 1960s and early 1970s were marked by protests and violence on college campuses over the United States involvement in the war in Vietnam. Professors were dismissed or arrested for protesting. This turmoil reached a tragic climax in 1970 with the killing of several students in Kent, Ohio. Threats to and violations of academic freedom continued in the 1980s. The U. S. government, in the name of national security, imposed severe restraints on the dissemination of research results (Brickman, 1994). “The state university not only had broadened the scope of higher learning in America but had also presented an ideal of academic freedom within a context which an enlightened public could support.” (Karier, 1986, p. 89) The state university reflected the success and failures of society publicly. And by the mid-twentieth century, Karier stated that it became obvious that academic
freedom would have to depend on an enlightened public opinion. The growth in knowledge and our innermost need of freedom to express ourselves go hand-in-hand.

... there is probably no way back. The growth of knowledge is one of the most irreversible forces known to mankind. It takes a catastrophe of very large dimensions to diminish the total stock of knowledge in the possession of man. Even in the rise and fall of great civilizations surprisingly little has been permanently lost, and much that was lost for a short time was easily regained. Hence there is no hope for ignorance ... we cannot go back to the childhood of our race. (Full, 1972, p. 23)

Our history of academic freedom has progressed through the ages since well before the time of the Inquisition. We are now in what we expect historians will call “The Information Age.” We have free access to journals, papers and information of all kinds that were once limited to the academic community. Our universities educate an ever-increasing number of people, including all school teachers. Academic freedom is the fundamental building block of that educational process.
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