

To Our Readers

The subjects of intellectual freedom, academic freedom, and free speech have become flashpoints in contemporary society. A chorus of commentators from across the political spectrum increasingly decry what they see as a conformist climate in which open discourse is stifled. Such calls for freedom of thought have deep roots in modern Western society, as expressed in the words of Alexander Meiklejohn, who served as president of Amherst College in the early twentieth century. To him, an institution of higher education should have “no list of dogmas or doctrines which it seeks to teach . . . no catalogue of things to be believed, nor any list of problems which should not be discussed.”¹

Champions of liberalism have long suspected religion of hostility toward intellectual freedom (hence Meiklejohn’s disparaging reference to “dogmas or doctrines”). These suspicions seemed to be well-founded in July 2022, when the Holy Synod of the Orthodox Church in America issued an injunction aimed at suppressing open inquiry on the subject of sexuality and same-sex relationships. The bishops wrote: “We call upon all clergy, theologians, teachers, and lay persons within the Orthodox Church in America never to contradict these teachings by preaching or teaching against the Church’s clear moral position; by publishing books, magazines, and articles which do the same; or producing or publishing similar content online.”²

Yet, as any serious scholar of patristic writings is aware, the great thinkers of the Church engaged in lively and often scathing debate in their pursuit of truth. Their opinions, consensual as well as divergent, were informed by the scientific advances and cultural mores of their times. The problem of intellectual challenge and the Church’s response to it is as ancient as the Church itself. After all, it was Saint Paul who introduced the word “heresy” into Christian discourse when he noted—and did not condemn—the presence of “intellectual factions” within the community of the faithful (1 Cor. 11:19).

Several essays in the current issue of *The Wheel* directly address the statement by the OCA Synod and its impact on the life of the Church. Other contributions explore different facets of the question of intellectual freedom. For example, the issue includes two articles on the “Sophia controversy” of the 1930s—one contemporaneous with the events and one looking back at them.

We do not mean to exempt contemporary academia itself from scrutiny. While it is not the main focus of this issue, many recent developments in the academy—including among some progressive Orthodox scholars—have

¹ Alexander Meiklejohn, *The Liberal College* (Boston: Marshall Jones Company, 1920), 91.

² Holy Synod of the Orthodox Church in America, “Statement on Same-Sex Relationships and Sexual Identity” (2022), <https://www.oca.org/holy-synod/statements/holy-synod/holy-synod-issues-statement-on-same-sex-relationships-and-sexual-identity>.

shown that the left can be just as intolerant as the right when established ideas are challenged. The warnings of Bayard Rustin, a black gay Christian organizer who worked closely with Martin Luther King, Jr. in the civil rights movement, are worth recalling. In 1969, Rustin predicted that if academic programs—however noble their intentions—imposed political litmus tests on their faculty, these professors would never produce top-quality scholarship. Among other reasons, Rustin foresaw that “their academic freedom will be curtailed by their obligation to adhere to the revolutionary ‘line’ of the moment.”³ His statement appears today as a prescient warning about constraints on intellectual freedom from all sides.

³ Bayard Rustin, “The Myth of Black Studies” (1969), in *Time on Two Crosses: The Collected Writings of Bayard Rustin*, ed. Devon W. Carbado and Donald Weise (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2003), 215.

The subject of this volume is so broad that it has obliged us to assemble a double issue, which will be followed by a special bonus book-length essay forming part of *The Wheel Library* series. Even so, we are aware that we are merely scratching the surface of the topic. It is our hope that this volume will inaugurate an ongoing dialogue on this vital subject and elicit further contributions from our community. ✱



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