

The Limits of Academic Freedom

by Thomas C. Reeves

Many people outside academia believe that professors, especially if they have tenure, may say anything in class, no matter how heretical, blasphemous, ideological, or even crazy. (Inside academia, it is quietly but firmly understood that limits exist, such as words believed to express racism, sexism, and heterosexism. There are no enemies on the Left.) The argument often presented is that the protection of the concept of academic freedom is total, shielding the professor from any and all attempts to bridle the inquiring mind. The result, it is said, is progress. Damn the censors. All hail the Enlightenment. But the creators of academic freedom, in the early 20th century, had a deeper understanding of academic freedom, noting that it entailed obligations as well as rights. Stephen H. Balch, president of the National Association of Scholars, recently published an excellent piece in *Academic Questions* on higher education in Pennsylvania that quoted them at length.

In 1915, John Dewey and other founders of the American Association of University Professors declared, "The claim to freedom of teaching is made in the interest of the integrity and of the progress of scientific inquiry; it is, therefore, only those who carry on their work in the temper of the scientific inquirer who may justly assert this claim. The liberty of the scholar within the university to set forth his conclusions, be they what they may, is conditional by their being conclusions gained by a scholar's method and held in a scholar's spirit; that is to say, they must be the fruits of competent and patient and sincere inquiry, and they should be set forth with dignity, courtesy, and temperateness of language." Balch noted that what was true in 1915 is true today. "To justify its existence and autonomy, the university must be an institution dedicated to rigor; reasoned discourse grounded in clarity, evidence, and logic; an openness to dissent; and as much objectivity as is possible in taking on difficult and complex inquiries."

So, before us is the case of Professor Kevin Barrett, a 47-year-old Muslim convert who is a part-time lecturer in the Folklore Department at his alma mater, the University of Wisconsin-Madison. With a Ph.D. in African Languages and Literature, Barrett is scheduled to offer a course on Islam in the fall. What distinguishes the professor, rather than any scholarly achievements, is a particularly fantastic assertion: In class and in public, he loudly declares that the 9/11 attacks were conceived and carried out by the Bush administration, not terrorists, in order to create a war between Muslims and Christians. Barrett quotes a supporter who declares, "It is already possible to know, beyond a reasonable doubt, one very important thing: the destruction of the World Trade Center was an inside job, orchestrated by terrorists without our own government."

This has drawn the wrath of Wisconsin's Democratic Governor Jim Doyle and several major state Republicans, including Congressman Mark Green, who is running against Doyle. (Barrett fired off an angry letter to the governor, contending, "I understand that there are Green and Libertarian candidates running for governor, and I predict that the controlled demolition of our corrupt two-party system by the 9/11 truth movement may begin here in Wisconsin this fall, with you and Mr. Green serving as first victims.")

When Provost Patrick Farrell, after a brief investigation, decided to retain Barrett, even the left-wing *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* editorialized against this misuse of academic freedom. On July 12, it declared that Barrett's thesis was ridiculous, however popular it is in the Muslim world. "Not only should Barrett, after review, have not been allowed to teach this course, he shouldn't have been hired to do it in the first place. No freedom, including academic freedom, is absolute. There are limits." Exactly. Scholars can express opinions, especially if they are founded on rigorous thought and extensive research, but they can't make up facts to suit their own fantasies or proclivities. (At a mosque in Detroit recently, a speaker was applauded when accusing Israel of having secret chemical weapons that destroy the internal soft tissues of Arabs.) There must be rational boundaries for academic freedom or the American university is without intellectual standards and thus of little or no value.

A public opinion poll published earlier this year showed that large majorities of Wisconsin residents think the University of Wisconsin System overpriced, overstaffed, and out of step with the average citizen. On July 20, a letter signed by 52 Assembly representatives and nine state senators, including GOP leaders, demanding Barrett's dismissal. Madison officials, apparently caring little or nothing about the flagship campus's public image or legislative clout, remain determined to keep Barrett in the classroom. The highly partisan governor has now sided with the university. The repercussions should be interesting.