

*Academic Freedom and Christian Scholarship*, by Anthony J. Diekema

Reviewed by [Stephen H. Webb](#) in the [February 7, 2001](#) issue

Anyone who has been on a faculty search committee knows how hard it is to evaluate candidates. You need to look not only at their intellectual credentials and professional competence but also at how they would fit into the institution. But institutional ethos is usually only vaguely defined and talking about personality issues can be awkward. What exacerbates the difficulty is the notion of academic freedom, which has become so expansive a concept that it is often interpreted to mean that faculty should be free to say and believe whatever they want. If freedom is the highest academic value, how can educational institutions make moral judgments about what kind of person best fulfills their particular mission?

Anthony J. Diekema, who was president of Calvin College in Grand Rapids from 1976 to 1996, presents a wise and careful treatment of this vexed topic. Calvin College is one of America's great academic institutions precisely because it succeeds so well at balancing faith and freedom. When I talk to religion colleagues about the difficulties of making room for faith perspectives in education, someone inevitably points out the exception that proves the rule: "But of course there's Calvin College." It thus comes as no surprise that this crucible of experience has produced the best proposal to solve the problem of truth and responsibility in education.

In opposition to the American Association of University Professors, Diekema notes that academic freedom is not a constitutional right, like freedom of speech. It does not mean that anything goes. Instead, it is a custom within academic institutions that is inevitably framed by a particular worldview. Diekema thus insists that academic freedom must be defined contextually, in terms of each institution's mission statement. The relationship between teacher and institution should be more like a covenant than a contract. Both sides must have an explicit understanding of how the institution defines the pursuit of truth.

This does not mean that church-related colleges do not need to honor the freedom of their faculty. Rather, these colleges need to articulate a specifically Christian notion of freedom. Diekema is very sensitive to the problems Christian scholars face

in Christian schools, where they must often deal with external pressures to conform to narrow notions of the Christian faith.

This book is not just for Christian educators. Diekema's discussion of tenure is especially good, showing how it can hinder academic freedom for younger faculty. If his book were taken seriously by administrators at any kind of college or university, it might result in a significant transformation in how we think about the teaching profession.