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Withrow & Wecker's "Consider No Evil: Two Faith Traditions and the Problem of Academic Freedom in Religious Higher Education" - Book Review

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Brandon G. Withrow and Menachem Wecker.
***Consider No Evil: Two Faith Traditions and the Problem of Academic Freedom in
Religious Higher Education***
Eugene OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014 pb 198pp
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In *Consider No Evil*, Brandon Withrow and Menachem Wecker set out to look at the restrictions placed on academic freedom of faculty and students by the religions traditions of their communities and institutions. They focus in on conservative, perhaps very conservative, institutions and instances that weave a sobering story of power, control, fear, strong-willed leaders, “the malignancy of a community turned upon itself, and the complexities of the human element present in every situation” (p xii). If their intent was to highlight the restrictions placed by these academic institutions, they have done so in spades.

The authors begin the book by each telling about their own spiritual pilgrimage growing up in conservative religious families and communities – one Christian, the other Jewish. They follow their personal stories in Part I with short, sweeping narratives of the historical development of religious education in their own traditions in Part II, and highlight various institutional difficulties experienced by faculty and students who test the boundaries of academic freedom in conservative institutions in Part III. The authors conclude Part IV with some institutional recommendations and some advice (even a warning or two) for faculty members and students who to not toe the institutional line. Clearly, they do so at some personal and professional risk.

It must be said that there are restrictions on academic freedom in any institutional context – public or private. I know of no institution where faculty can simply do whatever

they want without regard for the values, conventions, and concerns of their academic community, and there are certainly cases of hurtful and mean-spirited decisions on the part of institutional leaders in all sectors of higher education, but since this book seeks to highlight the problem of academic freedom in (very) conservative religious institutions of higher education, I will focus my remarks on these institutions as well.

First, Withrow and Wecker argue that while theology and how one reads the bible are center stage in most academic freedom difficulties in conservative religious institutions, theology or one's view of the bible are actually justifying narratives for maintaining control. That is to say, at the heart of most difficulties is the struggle for power and control, and the currency is fear. Theological debates merely provide the cover. I think they are right. And fear is debilitating because it drives discourse, the rare air of any academic community, underground or behind closed doors. When this happens, and it usually does, life together suffers.

Second, the authors suggest that the solution to address academic freedom issues is tenure, clear policies and procedures (including honest, forthright statements about what is and what is not permitted), and a healthy approach to shared governance. Again, I think that they are right. However, these suggestions are hardly new. In fact, they were clearly outlined in the 1940 Statement of the AAUP (and in earlier statements as well), but the authors make it clear that such practices are evident in many religious institutions. For example, speaking of Yeshiva, the authors note that “. . . academic freedom is selectively invoked when convenient but blatantly disregarded and abandoned when it collides with the institution's central and deep-seated orthodoxy” (p 105). Other instances in other seminaries are provided as well.

Finally, the most troubling aspect of this text for me is the idea that some institutions are not really a college or university at all, but rather an institution of indoctrination where the pursuit of truth takes a back seat to the prevailing orthodoxy. Faculty members in such institutions are advised to “be careful about playing in another’s sandbox. If you want to be a biologist who accepts conclusions based solely on the evidence, regardless of how it affects the theological interpretation or reading of the Bible, then a conservative institution is not for you. Period.” Continuing, “Scientists must adhere to professional standards in their fields . . . and this may not mix with a theological perspective that requires a literal reading of Genesis 1. Know your playground and its rules: and if you can’t play by those rules, find a playground that suits you better” (150). A different playground, indeed, perhaps one that is truly an institution of higher education worthy of its name.

Consider No Evil brings issues of power, control, and institutional honesty to light. Although it is a bit disjointed and troubling at times, leaving most of the issues unresolved, I highly recommend this book because it forthrightly discusses important issues that conservative (dare I say very conservative), religious institutions gloss over or ignore altogether. Whether this sector of religious education is really higher education, where issues of academic freedom come into play or merely a sandbox of indoctrination masquerading as a college or university, will be up to the reader to decide.

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