**The Freedom of Science and Its Enemies**

Once upon a time, scientists knew that the better argument counts, regardless of who it comes from! That has changed radically. Entire areas of science must - supposedly - be “decolonized” and freed from racism. Even mathematics seems to breathe the spirit of “white dominance.” Accordingly, we are told positive discrimination must therefore be used to help minorities. Any lack of equal societal “representation” calls for quotas! Karl Popper (1902-1994), one of the great philosophers of the 20th century, warned against the dominance of ideology and emotion over arguments as a "revolt against reason". Today, pressure comes from various sides: from student unions, Antifa-related groups, or unfair media coverage. Political one-sidedness has increasingly become an instrument of power. However, it is not just pressure from outside, conformity pressure is increasingly coming from within. Advance obedience becomes a pre-filter for what “can be said”. This is particularly difficult for young scientists. However, society needs independent science, otherwise science degrades to an (expensive) source of justification for politics. Christians are often not as alone in their longing for freedom and truth as they think. There are many more people who think just as sensibly and together it is easier to make a difference in science, politics, and society. Let's do it, otherwise at some point only the enemies of freedom will do it!

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1. **The better argument counts!**

I am a founding member of a German academic network for the freedom of science[[1]](#endnote-1) that went public just recently beginning of Febr. 2021. In the following days and weeks, I was asked to state the reasons, why I am - as a physicist - a member of such a network. A newspaper article on the network started with a quote of mine: [[2]](#footnote-1) “The better argument counts, regardless of who it comes from!” I argued that people who do not conform to a ‘politically correct’ pattern are quickly confronted with accusations of being racist, discriminatory or anti-feminist. Not just the humanities but also the sciences are increasingly targeted. Even mathematics has recently been accused of 'white supremacy' and supposedly must be freed from the requirement for objectivity. The head of the local general student committee replied that local members of the network “should carefully consider the company they associate with and which right-wing populist discourse on 'cancel culture' they fuel” And he warns: “Anyone who is serious to stand up for freedom of science is definitely wrong there.” I don’t know if this person was aware that he basically confirmed what I was denying: Not the argument counts, but the person who states it! And on top of all that, the critic also requires the right to make wild assumptions of a person’s political position. However, as unfair as it is, the weapon is powerful since most people are getting paralyzed even at the thought of such a charge. But does it necessarily mean, the aggressor always wins? I don’t think so. The thoughts I want to unfold here are not only meant to understand the mechanisms but also to encourage the reader not to get paralyzed but to take courage.

1. **The threefold revolt**
	1. The revolt against truth

The journalist Douglas Murray described the lacking search for truth in western Europe’s academia as follows: “Instead of being inspired by the spirit of truth and the search for the great questions, the continent’s philosophers have instead become entranced by how to avoid questions. Their deconstruction not only of ideas but of language has led to a concerted effort never to get beyond the tools of philosophy. Indeed, avoidance of great issues sometimes seems to have become the sole business of philosophy. In its place is an obsession with the difficulties of language and a distrust of all fixed things. The desire to question everything in order never to get anywhere appears to be the point, perhaps in order to defang both words and ideas for fear of where both might lead.” [[3]](#endnote-2) Murray, as a non-Christian, clearly identifies a motive of avoiding search for truth: The discovery of truth may come with a price! While such avoidance frequently finds public adoration, the Bible has quite another view when it gives the advice “Don’t have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels.” (NIV, 2. Tim. 2, 23)

* 1. The revolt against reason

Abandoning truth goes along with abandoning reason. The replacement is ideology, which I will define in our context as ideas and worldviews that are not based on evidence and good arguments, but that essentially aim to change or stabilize political power. Ideologies are usually driven by strong convictions and emotions. Karl Popper (1902-1994), one of the eminent philosophers of the 20th century, clearly described the consequences of the dominance of ideology and emotions over reason and arguments and described this situation as a “revolt against reason”: “The abandonment of the rationalist attitude, of the respect for reason and argument and the other fellow’s point of view, the stress upon the ‘deeper’ layers of human nature all this must lead to a the view that thought is merely a somewhat superficial manifestation of what lies within these irrational depths. It must nearly always, I believe, produce an attitude which considers the person of the thinker instead of his thought. It must produce the believe that ‘we think with our blood’, or ’with our national heritage’, or ‘with our class’.”[[4]](#endnote-3) This description corresponds very closely to the experience I described in part I above. At the same time, Popper leads all great ideologies such as racism, nationalism and communism back to a common theme with different variations.

* 1. The revolt against science

Research is based, among other criteria, on “rigorously questioning all findings, and permitting and promoting critical discourse within the research community.”[[5]](#endnote-4) This is obviously not possible in a framework dominated by ideology. Science requires to be open for its outcomes, wherever the results lead to. If it is clear in a given area of science what can be researched or what is an acceptable or unacceptable outcome of a study, then science in this field is dead.

1. **The twofold pressure on science**
	1. Pressure from outside

An article in a major German newspaper[[6]](#endnote-5) in mid-2020 reported on the results of a survey commissioned by the German Association of University Professors and Lecturers[[7]](#endnote-6), in which 30% of the university lecturers surveyed said that political correctness restricted their research and teaching. A study on academic freedom[[8]](#endnote-7) in the UK reported that 32% of right-of-center university teachers avoid making public political statements because they feared negative consequences for their careers or social pressures at university while of the university professors on the left, only 13% said they are politically reticent. The article also refers to an open letter[[9]](#endnote-8) from 150 intellectuals and authors from very different professional and political backgrounds who complain about the excesses of an aggressive “cancel culture”, i.e. the push out or “delete” (cancel) of politically undesirable persons or organizations from the public. The social climate in the USA seems to be much more heated than in Europe.

Pressure comes from different sources: Sometimes left-extremist groups threaten to use violence, sometimes student representations try to prevent talks and sometimes (fear of) media coverage in-line with the current political mainstream inhibits a free discussion. University rectorates often find it difficult to protect colleagues who have been attacked. On top of all this, funding regulations - especially from the EU - increasingly include regulations on “Gender equality” across all areas of science[[10]](#endnote-9). As a consequence, non-scientific criteria and political one-sidedness are increasingly becoming an instrument of directing science.

* 1. Pressure from within

But it's not just pressure from outside, pressure to conform is increasingly coming from within. Advance obedience becomes a pre-filter for what can be "said". This is particularly fatal for young scientists. Questions like “Do I get a professorship or a project if I don't use gender “sensitive” language?” are of course not openly expressed but are nevertheless real. Pressure for conformity is increasing. A colleague once expressed this situation as “We are used to answering nonsense with nonsense.”

1. **Why do we need (politically) independent science?**

Society needs independent science, otherwise science degrades to an (expensive) source of justification for politics. There are especially two dangers to be confronted: i) Science is more and more used as a substitute for responsible political decision making. This has become abundantly clear during the corona pandemic. ii) Science is used as a justification for ideologically biased decision making. A prominent example is the discussion of the response to climate change. Assuming the mainstream view on climate change is correct, science can give no justification to restructure the whole society according to a “socially just reshaping” as the only appropriate response to climate change.

In the present political setting, reference to scientific results is often made to end any further discussion. However, it is often forgotten, that science doesn’t deliver ultimate truth. Science progresses and views can alter. For this reason, critical and controverse public discussion is mandatory. In addition, scientists need to clearly distinguish between scientific statements they make from within their field of expertise and personal opinions.

1. **Liberation**
	1. Liberation of mind

Christians often seem to think “Am I discriminating others by my Christian conviction?” “What right do I have to speak about Christian faith in view of an omnipresent naturalistic view on science? Alvin Plantinga, one of the eminent contemporary Christian philosophers said in view of the right of free thinking[[11]](#endnote-10): “So the Christian philosopher has his own topics and projects to think about; and when he thinks about the topics of current concern […], he will think about them in his own way, which may be a different way. He may have to reject certain currently fashionable assumptions” and concludes: “the Christian philosopher has a perfect right to the point of view and prephilosophical assumptions he brings to philosophic work; the fact that these are not widely shared outside the Christian […] community is interesting but fundamentally irrelevant.” That is a good example of mental freedom for Christians, or as Paul says: “Do not conform to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” (NIV, Ro. 12, 2).

* 1. Liberation of speech

It is, however, a long way from the liberation of mind to free speech and action. The famous conformity experiments of Solomon Asch[[12]](#endnote-11) (1907-1996) demonstrated that a single person who gives a correct answer in a setting where others are instructed to give wrong answers liberates many people to stick to what they recognize as obviously true. This phenomenon is in accord with the findings described by Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann (1916 - 2010) the pioneer of public opinion polls in Germany and the founder of the theory of the ‘spiral of silence’.[[13]](#endnote-12) From observations such as these, Christians should be encouraged to publicly voice their opinion in order to encourage others to speak freely.

* 1. Liberation of action

Christians in academia are in a strategically important position and can and should work against the decline of science, which is part of being salt and light for the world. Christians are often not as alone in their longing for freedom as they think. There are many more people who think just as rationally. Together it is easier to help influencing science, politics and society despite an increasingly ideological environment. In addition of praying, especially for people in governmental functions, it is important to communicate with other scientists and politicians in a politically informed way and so penetrate and influence science and society and get involved in public opinion making. It is encouraging to see that during the last years, a lot has been written on freedom in general and of freedom of science in particular. As mentioned above, a rapidly growing academic network of scientists has just recently been established in Germany1 that works for a free academic climate. This may be an encouragement for others. Let's go on, otherwise at some point only the enemies of freedom will do!

***Sources:***

1. <https://www.netzwerk-wissenschaftsfreiheit.de/> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The following statements are translated from the German newspaper “Weser Kurier” of March 29th, 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. Douglas Murray: The strange death of Europe. Immigration, Identity, Islam. Bloomsbury Continuum (2017), p. 224 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
4. Karl Popper: The Open Society and its enemies. Routledge (1994), (first published in 1945), p. 440 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
5. German Research Foundation (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, DFG) “Guidelines for Safeguarding Good Research Practice” (2019), p. 9 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
6. <https://www.faz.net/-gyl-a27lg> [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
7. Thomas Petersen: Die Forschung ist frei, aber … , Forschung & Lehre 3/2020, S. 194-197 (Forschung & Lehre is the periodical of the German Association of University Professors and Lecturers „Deutscher Hochschulverband“) [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
8. Remi Adekoya, Eric Kaufmann, and Thomas Simpson: Academic freedom in the UK - Protecting viewpoint diversity, Policy Exchange (2020), policyexchange.org.uk [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
9. <https://harpers.org/a-letter-on-justice-and-open-debate/> [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
10. See e.g. <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-mainstreaming/toolkits/gear/what-gender-equality-plan-gep> last visited May 1st 2021 [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
11. Alvin Plantinga: Advice to Christian Philosophers. With a special preface for Christian thinkers from different disciplines. *Faith and Philosophy – Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers* 1, S. 253-271 (1984). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
12. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Asch_conformity_experiments> [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
13. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elisabeth_Noelle-Neumann>

All internet-links have been last visited May 1st, 2021. The author assumes no responsibility for the contents of the links referenced here or the references therein or any other sources quoted. NIV stands for “New International Version” of the Bible in English. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)