

## RELIGION AND INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM

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Religion has  
been an enemy  
of intellectual

freedom. Most librarians have a war story or two ready for the telling about religiously-motivated challenges. The existing literature focuses almost exclusively on conflict between the two. Exceptions exist but they are hard to find and little noted (Miller). Reference tools devoted to intellectual freedom, such as Salem Press's three volume encyclopedia *Censorship* (Amey, 676), and religious reference tools with entries for censorship, such as the *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (391-392), demonstrate this antagonistic relationship. In *The Fear of the Word*, Eli Oboler documented in excruciating detail religion's role in censoring sexually explicit materials. Yet few if any scholars have systematically or extensively examined the positive aspects of this relationship.

This article advances the proposition that such an extensive and systematic examination would show that religion and intellectual freedom need not be enemies and that religion may actually be an ally of librarians in their defense of intellectual freedom. The article will establish the possibility of this proposition and identify avenues of research that might confirm it. It is not intended to provide the proof. It is an exercise in informed speculation.

First, one should note the obvious. Religion has never been monolithic in American society and is probably more diverse now than ever before. Within each and every one of America's religious traditions are quite likely a variety of views on questions of intellectual freedom and censorship (Davis, 242-243). Therefore, the urge to generalize must be resisted. What this article will demonstrate is that within the Judeo-Christian portion of this religious mix, there exists (and has existed) an affinity between the twin concerns of religious and intellectual freedom. Hence, at least a portion of the modern American religious community is a potential friend of intellectual freedom.

In the American context, both religion and libraries turn to the First Amendment of the United States Constitution as guarantor of their right to pursue their purposes unhindered by governmental interference.

Both are concerned with  
individual freedom. Both  
are concerned with the

individual's right to choose what to believe, to feel and to think — and the right to share those beliefs, feelings and thoughts with others.

This then is the first area for further study, a philosophical investigation of these two concepts. What are their origins, assumptions, similarities and differences? A parallel Judeo-Christian theological investigation would also be valuable, since this tradition was the dominant one during the development and institutionalization of these constitutional principles. To the non-philosopher and non-theologian, these two freedoms certainly appear to be two sides of the same coin. Genealogically speaking, they appear to be fraternal twins in the family of First Amendment freedoms. The next step is to do the historical equivalent of DNA matching.

In 16th century Continental Europe, the Protestant Reformation and the Catholic Counter-Reformation resulted in four distinct groups or movements: Catholic, Lutheran, Reformed and Anabaptist. The Anabaptists (or "rebaptizers") were the radical wing of Protestantism. They argued for the crazy, hard to imagine idea of a separation of church and state - the freedom to choose one's own religion rather than accept that of one's neighbors or prince. Though not the first to advocate tolerance, they appear to have been the first to survive that advocacy in any substantial numbers (Laursen, 1-8).

Most people did not buy it. The fact that some of the Anabaptists were anarchistic antinomians (lawless) did not help the pacifistic, disciplined ones now known as Mennonites. They were severely persecuted and their outrageous idea of toleration took a tenuous hold only in the Netherlands and then only after one hundred years of civil and religious warfare.

Is it possible that seeds of freedom were spread by refugees and survivors, those who of necessity had to keep a low profile, only to have these seeds sprout in later generations? No one has as yet conclusively proved a direct link between this Continental concept

of individual liberty and what was to develop later in England and America. However, there is a parallel, informative debate going on among church historians as to the influence of Continental Anabaptism on the origins of Baptists in 17<sup>th</sup> century England. The Anabaptists tend to find a link (Estep, 206-215). The Baptists do not (Torbet, 25-32). This relatively narrow (some would say obscure) debate is relevant because English Baptists have their roots in the same left wing Puritanism out of which came John Milton, one of the earliest advocates of freedom of the press. In addition, it produced the major Colonial champion of religious freedom, Roger Williams.

Turning to their England of the 1600s, one finds a direct relationship between rising demands for freedom of the press and of religion. The English Reformation was a relatively conservative one. The Reformed (or Calvinists) within the Anglican Church were unsatisfied; reforms had not gone far enough. Their continued agitation came to a head with the English Civil War during the reign of Charles I, along with the establishment of the Puritan Commonwealth. Throughout this period, one finds political and religious parties inextricably interconnected.

People argued for the right to hold a variety of beliefs and to print and circulate those beliefs. Diversity had become the rule rather than the exception. It is probably no coincidence that a significant segment of Cromwell's army were Baptists, ardent supporters of the separation of church and state, nor that the most eloquent advocate of a lessening of, if not an end to, press licensing, John Milton, was a Puritan non-conformist.

In *Areopagitica*, Milton argues that "... unless wariness be used, as good almost kill a man as kill a good book. Who kills a man kills a reasonable creature, God's image; but he who destroys a good book, kills reason itself, kills the image of God, as it were in the eye (149-150)." With this growing diversity of religious views within the body politic, arguments for liberty for some became arguments for liberty for all.

Though the possibility of such an interrelationship is clear, possibilities are not proofs. Here then is the another area open for examination. Who knew what and when did they know it? How aware of Anabaptism were the English Puritans and other nonconformists? Were they aware of Anabaptist views on specific issues? Did they read Anabaptist writings? If so, which ones? Did they ever explicitly refer to those views or writings, either in agreement or disagreement? What was the relationship among those Puritans arguing for press and religious freedoms? Many Puritans were concerned with establishing this freedom for themselves, but not for others. Some on their left, such as the Baptists, were seeking tolerance, if not freedom for all. How aware were they of each other's positions?

Here then is the third potential commonality of religious and intellectual freedom in American society. Both are rooted in the soil of personal liberty. Both advocate that a free market of ideas must be preserved and that it be a market in which one may seek the truth and in which one's truth may be held and shared. By the insight that religious wars had not, could not and should not settle the truth, and by the practical act of constitutionally removing the right of any one viewpoint, be it religious or political to official status, freedom for all was guaranteed. This official suspension of judgment may well be the genius of American civil society.

Another area of inquiry should be the subsequent relationship of religion and censorship during succeeding eras of American history. What were the changing dynamics? It is clear that even the field of librarianship was not an early advocate of intellectual freedom (American Library Association, xxii). It is only toward the beginning of the middle third of the twentieth century that the profession became an advocate of intellectual freedom (Geller, 143-146). An examination of the parallel rise of political and religious liberalism and their possible influences upon each other could be quite fruitful (Parekh, 115-116).

If we share common roots, why the constant conflict? One reason is that, while exercising one's own religious freedom, people forget that this may mean impinging on someone else's freedom. That is, people ignore the other side of the civil compact. To be guaranteed one's freedom, one has to grant it to everyone else. This is such a simple point that it is often missed in the heat of debate. However, it is a point through which librarians may well be able to establish contact with potential censors. Personal liberty is a common American value. The preservation of personal liberty is in everyone's best interests.

Another reason for these conflicts is the use of different definitions of censorship, often intermingled. There are at least two. First, there is a narrow definition. Censorship occurs or is threatened when any government body, such as a city council, a quasi-government body or a library board, attempts to limit or succeeds in limiting freedom of speech, of the press or their corollary, the freedom to read. A second, broader definition says that censorship occurs or is threatened when anyone or any group attempts to limit or succeeds in limiting speech, press or reading freedoms. Such attempts could include boycotts of stores selling certain magazines or refusing to purchase the products of companies that advertise during certain television programs.

The First Amendment guarantees the right of anyone or any group to advocate whatever they want

(well, almost anything). They can advocate that people not buy this journal, or not shop at that store or not watch a particular television program. It does not make them right. It does not mean that anyone has to agree with them. It does not mean they can make it stick. However, it is their constitutional right to try! In fact, they even have the right to advocate censorship in the narrower sense. However, the government does not have the right to take them up on it. People have the right to advocate constitutional changes that librarians might find abhorrent. In other words, censors are people, too. They have a right to their views and values and a right to express them.

This is especially true of religious groups. They have the freedom and right in American society to be as open or as closed as they wish. They have the freedom, the right and even the duty to advocate the truth as they see it. All groups, including religious groups, have a constitutional right to make the lives of librarians difficult. Just because people have a religious motive rather than a literary, artistic or political one does not remove their First Amendment right to be a pain in the neck. It does not give them the right to censor the library's collections.

Here is the most common of common ground - religion IS. This just may be the most fertile ground in which to cultivate a working relationship with potential religious censors. Religion is an inextricable element in human society. It is just as much a reality as politics, art, music or literature. There are parties within every form of human endeavor. There are Democrats and Republican and Libertarians; Freudians, Jungians and Adlerians; deconstructionists and structuralists; romance, mystery and science fiction writers and readers; and quilters, coin collectors, computer nerds and devotees of the culinary arts. Librarians collect for all of them.

There are also Christians, Jews, Muslims, Sikhs and adherents of Wicca. There are Lutheran churches, Catholic churches, and Four Square, Spirit-Filled, Apostolic, Bible-believing, Independent churches. Do librarians collect for their members? All of them are citizens, with the quite reasonable expectation that their informational needs for cookbooks, and even religious books, will be met within the fiscal constraints and collection development policies of their local community libraries.

Is this the case? Anecdotal evidence would seem to say no, at least in small and medium-sized public libraries. In the recent past, religious books were among the most frequently borrowed items via interlibrary loan among Indiana public libraries (Bucove). The temptation, since religious diversity is so great and the potential demand so high, perhaps even high enough to absorb most local budgets, may be to rely on interlibrary loan.

The argument that if one cannot buy everything in a given subject, then one must buy nothing of that subject, has been used time and again to justify not buying books on controversial subjects, thus dodging the controversy by self-censorship. During an Indiana Library Federation Annual Conference panel a few years ago, the Director of the St. Joseph County Library, one of only two public libraries in the state of Indiana that purchased a copy of *Madonna's Sex*, stated that he did so because demand was high and bookstores were charging citizens for a peek (Napoli). Many libraries seemed to be relying on the "we'll borrow it from someone else if anyone is brave enough to ask" form of service. It is just as fallacious a justification to rely on interlibrary loan for religious materials as it is for those with sexual content.

Here is another potentially fruitful area of research. What are the rates for interlibrary loan requests for religious materials compared to other categories? What are the collection development policies in public libraries for religious materials? What are the budget commitments compared to actual and potential community needs? Surveys and on-site comparisons hold the promise of informative results.

Other sources of conflict reside in the manner in which librarians handle religious materials once they are acquired and the way they treat the patrons who seek these materials. Without advocating political correctness, it takes little imagination to understand that sensitivity to religious terminology is crucial for ethical professional service. Sanford Berman has identified many such prejudices. What are the religious prejudices built into our cataloging systems, both subject heading and classification? A thorough examination of both the Library of Congress and Dewey subject heading and classification systems would at least raise the consciousness of librarians. Selective corrections would then be more likely and direct public service improved as reference personnel become more sensitive to appropriate terminology (Gouker).

A final area for further research that is crucial for developing working relationships and potential anti-censorship coalition is an examination of the contemporary positions on censorship of various religious denominations and inter-religious organizations and their members. Even among highly politicized groups, there is more diversity than the average person expects (Davis, 242-243). The author has attended many public meetings in which spokespersons from the religious community were present to both challenge and defend library collections.

How then should librarians deal with religion in libraries? Librarians should deal with it as they do with any and all other aspects of human experience.

Librarians serve the information needs of their communities. Therefore, they serve the religious informational needs of their communities by applying the same principles of balance and diversity that they apply to all the other competing needs. They must remember that there are rarely only two sides to an issue. Librarians must use all of their professional skills to choose representative resources. They must sensitize themselves to the dynamics of major religious disputes, as they do with all the other controversies that their communities encounter. In other words, they do their jobs.

Rather than start from a negative stance that religion is too dangerous to deal with, why not see the religious community as an opportunity for service? Librarians would not think of treating all genealogists as obsessive/compulsive sponges who will absorb all of their reference personnel's time if given an inch just because a tiny minority might have a little too much time on their hands. Librarians learn to set limits and provide appropriate resources and services.

For instance, this author lives in a community with a large Amish population. The local library will probably need more books about the Amish for their curious neighbors than it will for groups not represented at all in that area. It will also need a healthy collection of religious fiction and Westerns for the Amish youth. Other communities' religious informational needs will vary, depending on the characteristics of the population served by the library.

Why not see the meeting of religious informational needs as one legitimate expectation among many within a community and build policies to balance those expectations? Why not establish relationships with these groups as one would with other groups? Why not build bridges rather than maintain barriers? Such relationship building is no guarantee that controversies will not occur. However, it is much easier to communicate with those whom one knows, and by whom one is known, than with strangers. It is easier to raise a barn before a storm than during one.

Religious and intellectual freedom appear to share common roots and common ground, so why not a common cause? Religion has been and can be an enemy of intellectual freedom. However, it can also be a friend. Further research should prove it.

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