

## Preface

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Burning books is not a serious form of censorship today. When Alexandria's libraries were set afire by both pagans and Christians, it was serious indeed. Many irreplaceable volumes vanished of which we can only imagine the loss on the basis of the books that do survive from antiquity. But since the printing press and the copying machine, the burning of books has become merely symbolic. What is the equivalent today of the Alexandrian devastations occurs daily as worthy manuscripts are winnowed out for rejection in the selection process of the publishing world by the tight constraints of profit-only marketing.

Few publishers read manuscripts anymore that they have not received from agents or authors already known. Since agents screen for the big sellers they narrow drastically what reaches publishers. Their most editors today are told what to accept by the marketing staff, who get their notion of a good book from their field salespeople and the sales figures themselves. Three large bookstore chains are rapidly driving out independent booksellers and establishing categories and patterns for success that publishers feel obliged to fit. Tax laws no longer exempt publishers' inventories, so that most editors tend to reject manuscripts that they think will not pay big the first season out but only pay their way over the long haul.

All of these factors combine to restrict enormously what the public will be allowed to read. Censorship in the United States today comes not from a government suppressing ideas but from a corporate industry making money. The most fanatic censors could not wreak damage of this magnitude. Burned books have at least seen the light of day, and other copies can be found elsewhere. But we will never know what worthy books are not published, no more than we will ever know what the books destroyed in Alexandria had to say.

The constraints on the publication of textbooks exceed by far those just described for general trade books. The stakes are much higher, because textbooks are usually produced in series and in hardcover, most often entail huge outlays of capital for development, and must conform

to local school adoption requirements that make for a lose-all or win-all game. The content of textbooks has been very limited ever since 1974, when the most tumultuous and significant schoolbook controversy ever to occur in North America broke out in Kanawha County, West Virginia. The book you are holding is a case study of that dispute and its import.

As director of one of the programs condemned by some there, I wanted very much to speak out about the issues but felt that my remarks might be taken as the vinegar of sour grapes. Actually, my reactions were very complex and included many other feelings and thoughts besides just hurt and anger. After ruminating them for a good decade, I decided to set forth my views of what happened and explain how this case may illuminate phenomena bigger today than then.

One good thing about the dispute was that rural Appalachia had spoken its mind too, for about the first time, and thus joined in the democratic process at last. A goodly part of this book is given over to what the people there had to say, either in the form of transcripts of interviews I did with some of them or of objections others of them wrote about specific selections in the disputed books.

Recounting the story and hearing out the protesters help raise issues that I see not only as more urgent today than in 1974 but as concerning society at large. The rise of the New Right brought to the surface underlying relationships between politics and religion often ignored in our secular age. In analyzing these from psychological and spiritual perspectives as well as educational, I try to point out dangerous traits and trends and so cannot claim to avoid making some judgments. I can only hope that these will be taken as efforts, however imperfect, to find a healing way.

I have broken two rules of liberals. I do not patronize poor, ill educated, or disenfranchised people by exempting them from the same critical examination I feel free to direct toward the rest of society, however much I might champion the same minority or disadvantaged group in the forums of that society. The case at hand has made me realize that our old garden-variety liberals have never fully faced up to the painful dilemma that the people they take under their wing may be the most likely to violate their liberal principles, precisely because cultures of poverty, ignorance, and rejection more readily generate bigotry, racism, and violence. It's easier to behave well if you're well off (though some who are don't).

In *Death at an Early Age* Jonathan Kozol rightly disclosed the appalling mistreatment of black children in the public schools of inner-city Boston. But the villains in that case were the same working-class Irish descendants of immigrants that, in another context, liberals would be defending. These Irish were themselves discriminated against by the

Protestant English, who got to America first and who had been persecuting the Irish so badly in the old country that they left it to come here. In fact, each ethnic wave to the big cities of this country has tended to abuse the next. Oppressors are made up largely of the oppressed, the bitter fact is, for the same reason that the great majority of criminals come from the disadvantaged or destitute pockets of society.

The majority who opposed the books in Kanawha County were mountaineer fundamentalists who have seldom received any attention but ridicule and who have been as grossly exploited as any group in our society. No region of the United States has been so plundered and taken over by outsiders. Miners die because companies cut corners on the expense of safety measures. But the mountaineer's proud code disdains welfare. The book protesters put me in a bind. What do you do when those you would stand up for denounce you as the enemy and act in ways you can't approve? I have done the Appalachian fundamentalists the honor of not patronizing them, for after all we do not exempt those we regard as equals. I have also honored what they had to say by considering all of their objections as thoughtfully as I know how.

In fact, I have taken most seriously what was for them the heart of their outcry — their religious beliefs. This is how I came to break another rule of the liberal tradition. In an understandable reaction to superstition, bigotry, and church corruption of the past, intellectual and academic circles usually avoid treating religion seriously except as an object of study. Certainly it is a professional risk to admit that one might really believe such stuff, a breach of taste at the least. But I feel closest to the book protesters in their insistence on a spiritual framework and in their repudiation of materialism.

To avoid misunderstanding about this, however, let me draw a distinction between spirituality and religion. However divinely inspired in origin, any religion partakes of a certain civilization, functions through human institutions, and is therefore partial, culturally biased. Otherwise there would be no wars between religions or religious countries. Spirituality, on the other hand, is the essential impulse behind all religions before they become incarnated in cultures. It is a perception of other dimensions behind the manifested and of oneness behind the plurality of things. From this perspective arise ways of being and behaving that we call spiritual.

Readers need not believe this themselves to appreciate perhaps that my believing it makes it possible for me to treat the protesters' religiosity as more than poppycock and to play on their theme in ways that may make this case study more interesting than it might have been if I merely scoffed at or ignored what, in their eyes, was the basis of all their objections. Textbooks, schools, and indeed the society itself do suffer terribly

for want of a spiritual framework, it is true. Although such a framework cannot come into being the way the book banners tried – and continue to try – it would be best for all if a way *were* found, in keeping with the universalist spirituality of the founding fathers themselves.