
The Librarian as Censor

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In 1958 he became a monk of Ampleforth Abbey in Yorkshire (UK), where he was Prior from 1979-1983. While there he gained a Doctorate in theology/philosophy from Fribourg, Switzerland.

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"I have in my time seen a sad decline in manners and morals," words uttered by a certain English Jesuit, after which he paused and added, "said Adam to Eve." Father Freddie Turner had been Librarian and Archivist of Stonyhurst College from 1967 until his death in 2000.¹ Well, manners and morals are still declining, so it's natural that censorship should be increasing, and that protests about censorship should be increasing also.

In recent years we have been establishing at New Norcia, a couple of reading rooms with a view to encouraging first the monks and now our resident guests to browse the kind of books that we think would be good for them to read. So we have found ourselves having to make choices of what to include, and therefore to make choices of what to locate elsewhere. That has left me feeling a little uneasy, because it feels like censorship. Hence my decision to air this topic with you. I have come to the conclusion that librarians are inevitably censors, that it is desirable that they be aware of that fact, and that they stand to benefit their clients and themselves by keeping the relevant problems under discussion.

My personal prejudice is against censorship in any shape or form. But I suppose it depends on what you mean by censorship. Generally the word has a pejorative meaning for me, and the thesaurus on my word-processing programme feels the same way about it. To censor, it says, is to edit, to cut, to expurgate, to bowdlerise, to stifle, to gag and to repress. So I suppose I could have called this paper the Librarian as Editor, Cutter, Expurgator, Bowdleriser, Stifler, Gagger and Repressor. You probably wouldn't be offended if I commended you on your editing skills, but you might not be so happy to be congratulated on your expertise in stifling, gagging and repressing.

Let me propose some more ameliorative equivalents for the work of censoring which I am about to claim you do every day. To censor, I say, is to edit, to select, to highlight, to emphasise, to expand, to open out, and to encourage.

Aristotle has a principle that contraries are in the same genus.² For example, black and white are contraries, but they are both colours. So gagging and setting loose are contraries, but they are both exercises in the way a librarian might deal with a client on a trail of research. You may not be familiar with the sin of censorship in the library, but I'm sure you know the temptation to give less sympathetic

attention to the reader whose topic, whose approach and whose importunity you dislike than to the student whose sweet reasonableness, evident need and obvious potential bring out the best in you. If you fall for the temptation, I am suggesting that you negatively censor the one by saying, "So much of my time and no more", and affirmatively censor the other by saying, "Not that dictionary which is now out of date, but this one which has superseded it." Or maybe you don't have to say that. Maybe you pre-censored the dictionary shelf for all your clients by weeding out the second edition when the third edition was accessioned.

When I was librarian of Ampleforth Abbey I made a point of keeping all the editions I could lay my hands on of the Catholic moral theology manuals. Only by comparing them could you establish exactly when it ceased to be a mortal sin for tram-drivers to work on Sundays, for instance. On the other hand, you would only confuse the browser wanting to assess Catholic attitudes to work on Sundays now by giving equal prominence on the current reading-room shelf to all the works on moral theology from Augustine, *Saint* to Ratzinger, *Cardinal* Joseph.

You all make decisions about what is put on open access, what goes to stack, what goes out altogether, what is purchased and what is not, what is promoted and what is not. You can't give special promotion to everything: that would be a contradiction in terms, and although I'm accusing you librarians of being censors, I would not dream of accusing you of being contradictors of terms.

One form of censorship I have suffered from myself is the limitation imposed by library opening hours, or rather, library closing hours. Some libraries in Europe are only open to readers from 10 to 12 in the morning and from 5 to 7 in the evening. If you've travelled a hundred miles or more to consult their manuscript collections, you can feel very censored. Another nasty example I met as an undergraduate was the reservation system. The lecturer would set us an essay and

strongly recommend us to consult three particular books as well as the other forty-two in his bibliography. The librarian had thoughtfully provided multiple copies of the three books, ten of each. There were fifty of us in the class. The copies were all frozen for the duration of the essay. Censorship was my name for the system, and I was willing to blame the lecturer, the university budget control officer, the government, the publishers, and the librarian.

Of course librarianship is not the only form of censorship. Parents have to be censors. If you put the medicine chest high on the wall to be out of the children's reach, you'd better put the home medicine handbook up there too once the young ones start reading. Probably the most discussed areas of censorship these days are sex and violence on television, and pornography on the internet. Most of us I think would want to do some nannying by way of protecting quite young children from exposure to things that would do them harm, but most of us would be a bit uneasy about deciding at what age particular children should be exposed to what extent to what kinds of information about sex and violence. People who think nobody should ever under any circumstances be informed about either violence or sex are in my opinion quite dangerous, and their utterances should be censored.

But I digress. I was saying that censorship is widespread outside the library walls. Bankers keep a close eye on your credit card balance, and they've trained their computers to bark at you and bite



you if you overstep the limits they have determined for you. Some of my computer programmes are constantly censoring my compositions telling me that I have performed illegal actions and I am about to be shut down, stifled, gagged and repressed. The editors of letters to the editor must surely suppress more than half the letters

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received, and to judge by the quality of the letters they choose to publish, they are rendering conspicuous service to the reading public by censoring the rest. The telecom people will censor your phone number if you ask them nicely, so that the phone book appears to tell enquirers that you are not on the phone at all, and not resident in that town either.

We have a civilised custom in the monastery of inviting refectory guests to a cup of coffee and a glass of port in the parlour after lunch and before siesta. The table talk there often flows from the reading we have been hearing during lunch, but sometimes a guest will ask, "Have you been writing any good articles lately?" When I answered the other day that I was writing a paper on the Librarian as Censor and coming to the conclusion that everybody was a censor, this particular guest drew my attention to Tim Flannery's account of the problem faced by some of our academics when Pauline Hanson claimed in her book, *One Nation*, that many Australian Aborigines had been cannibals. Flannery says:

Hanson's claim was itself attacked violently, her accusation emphatically dismissed by many academics as evidence of Hanson's contemptible ignorance. And yet the debate troubled me deeply, for I knew that even a casual perusal of the Australian anthropological and historical literature indicated that cannibalism was indeed practised in some Aboriginal societies, albeit in a very different way from that claimed by Hanson. ...

While the debate was raging there was no room for equivocation, and every academic I saw interviewed over the issue chose to deny the evidence of cannibalism in Aboriginal societies, which most must surely have known of.

...

The feeling of those times – the time of *One Nation* – was very like being in a war. It was a winner-take-all battle between a reactionary old Australia with its belief in *terra nullius* and an emerging, post-colonial and reconciled Australia. And as in any war, the first

casualty was truth, and it was those on the liberal left as well as those on the right who were, almost wholesale, willing to sacrifice that truth for contingency.³

Although I am advocating a certain kind of censorship by librarians, I need to add that there are particular dangers in censorship when the censors consider themselves enlightened, whether to the right or to the left. In the 1950s when I was an impressionable young adult, there were two infallible authorities in the world, each claiming world-wide allegiance, and each producing daily newspapers that faithfully presented their ideologies and faithfully censored any material that deviated therefrom. Stalin was pontificating on every subject under the sun in *Pravda*, and Pius XII was doing the same thing in *L'Osservatore Romano*. I understand that that kind of censorship no longer applies to *Pravda*. I think there is a higher risk of the wrong kind of censorship in religious institutions than there is among governments. I guess the highest risk is to be expected in theocracies. Hence the importance of theology that is both profoundly faith-filled and profoundly intelligent and critical; hence the importance of theological librarians.

The more the explosion of information erupts, the more necessary it is for us to have plenty of censorship performed for us, lest we be drowned (changing the metaphor a little) in an ocean of irrelevant information and false information: the phone book, like your computer or the airline flight schedule, is out of date and positively misleading five minutes after it was produced.

Put yourself in the position of a Buddhist without ready access to a library, wanting to know something about the Christian church. The place I go first these days when I want to know anything is www.google.co.uk. That very useful reference tool would immediately offer this Buddhist enquirer 1-10 results of about 2,650,000. Actually it wouldn't be quite immediately. It took 0.12 seconds when I tried it last night. And although Google

does its best to prioritise entries for you, it doesn't pretend that it gets the priorities right, and it often doesn't. I reckon somebody who had the time might usefully prune the total number of those entries to say 1,650,000.

It is not only that we need protection as consumers. We have to be active censors all the time ourselves. We must do our own filtering for ourselves and for one another so that the appropriate degree of focus is given to the most important pieces of information for whatever task we have in hand from moment to moment. You know what it's like trying to listen to some astonishing news item on the radio while you're navigating your car in strange city territory while the backseat driver is enquiring whether you know the one about the Englishman, the Irishman and the Iraqi.

We are all censors, whether we know it or not. It's like the fact that we're all philosophers: we necessarily have some working presuppositions about reality which shape our world view and enable us to make our practical decisions. We're all theologians, perhaps especially those of us who would claim not to be: that would be a highly theological position to adopt. Molière's M. Jourdain was astonished to learn that he had been talking prose for forty years without knowing that he was doing so.⁴ But he was, all the same.

The library catalogue of the English Benedictine monastery in Paris in the eighteenth century had a section called Hell, which contained such morally dangerous material as the Authorised Version of the Bible and the *Book of Common Prayer*. The hand-written catalogue remains in Paris where it was requisitioned along with many of the books after the French Revolution.⁵ The monks fortunately escaped to a less censorious country, and are now (I mean their descendants, I mean their monastic successors, are now) leading an edifying and ecumenically enlightened life at Douai Abbey in Berkshire. Their library no longer has a section called Hell, and I'm sure the two books I mentioned are now shelved along-

side others of their class on open access.

In case you think that historical example is a peculiarly Roman Catholic piece of depravity, let me put some questions:

- Have you ever noticed that the earlier Bibles in your collection were published by licence of the King?
- Have you wondered what happened to the heads of those who printed Bibles not licensed by the King?
- And where have you shelved your library's copy of the *Book of Mormon*?

I would not want to deny that there are some peculiar, very peculiar, Roman Catholics who cultivate censorship as one of the principal duties of their faith. There was and probably still is a group of vigilantes who kept an eagle eye on the accessions list of the Catholic Library in Perth for anything that might offend their pious eyes, and who played through every catechetical video before it was released to the unsuspecting gaze of innocent seventeen-year-old rugby players. But I suspect even that phenomenon is not restricted to the Holy Roman Empire. It belongs to every kind of fundamentalism, which is a religion in its own right, parasitic upon every Christian denomination or non-denomination, upon every faith or refusal of faith known to the human race.

As abbot, I pass on to the library most of the printed matter sent to my desk by fundamentalists of all persuasions. I think it is a part of our crazy mixed-up reality that needs to be preserved for the benefit of posterity, so that future generations will understand the odds against which we are pitted, and judge us more sympathetically. But I do in fact censor some of this fundamentalist material. I have a file in my office called Lunatic Fringes, and from time to time the items there move to the file of the same name in our archives. I don't mind if posterity judges my judgments perverse, but I draw the line at putting the ephemera deriving from the Little Pebble, for instance, into our library. And I hasten to add I was doing so even before he was excommunicated.

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One piece of deception I have myself practised was the deliberate displacement of some of Rudolf Bultmann's books on scripture. I was at that time the assistant librarian who did the work at Ampleforth, and Fr Barnabas was the librarian who



ordered the books. He used to read *L'Osservatore Romano*, and I didn't. So he knew that Bultmann's ideas were dangerous to the faith and morals of young monks studying scripture. I reckoned that if *L'Osservatore* bothered

to censure them they must be saying something original, something worth considering. So when some volumes came in by donation, I duly shelved them in the philosophy section of the library. I was the philosophy teacher, and Fr Barnabas who taught moral theology and canon law was not in the habit of browsing the philosophy shelves. You might (correctly) deduce that this incident was in the steam age of the monastery library, when books were classified by instinct and shelved by fixed shelf numbers. It's an example of censorship working one way in Fr Barnabas' intention, and a different way to meet my subversive purposes.

That example might have put fresh heart into some of the frustrated assistant librarians here present. And it might have rung alarms for some of the frustrated principal librarians. On what authority does this non-practising ex-librarian presume to put ideas of insubordination and sabotage into the heads of precocious young things who lack the wisdom of grey-bearded – I'm sorry, grey-haired – experience? That's another issue that deserves attention: on what authority?

Most professional librarians are employees of some other person or of some institution, and to some extent they would feel morally bound to follow the policies laid down by the employing body. Yet I would hope that in many cases the librarian would feel some obligation to give a lead to the employer, to educate it, to

open its horizons. In the lectures he gave to us library students at the University of Queensland, the late Harrison Bryan used to inspire us with the story of how much the rise of public libraries depended on their pre-history in the Workers' Educational Association. The free public library was an avowedly ideological ideal, and we were the beneficiaries of the dedicated librarians who made sure the ideal was realised.

I'm not sure whether you are lucky or unlucky if your employing authority has a set of explicit policy statements. Such documents seem to be necessary to salvation in the world of management these days. The more detailed the policies are, the less room there is for a librarian to be a force for good or for evil, to act as a human being. I suppose it depends on whether you are the kind of person who likes to know where you stand, or the kind who likes to take a little leap sideways from time to time.

Personally I'm in a rather vulnerable position in this regard. As abbot of the monastery I don't want and don't expect to sit on the farm committee or to issue it with many directives; and the same would go for most of our other departmental management committees. Our monastic liturgy committee finds me a little volatile to deal with, and I feel sorry for the librarian, the archivist and their respective committees, because I make sure I chair those committees, and those who know me well would tell you that I am not above throwing my weight around when I think I know what I'm talking about. Perhaps monastery librarians should have special training in how to run a good library without the abbot's noticing what they're doing.

It would be taking things a bit too far to refer here to the war criminals' normal defence that they were only following orders from above. Suffice it to say that librarians should be not blind slaves of their employing bodies, but intelligent and responsible servants of their employers and their clients and their fellow librarians.

The more the managers are preoccupied

with the immediate needs of the present moment, the more important it is for librarians and other enlightened members of staff to bear in mind the needs of future generations of readers. Abbots may come and abbots may go, but a monastery library should go on forever. I have often heard myself say, though I'm not sure it's right, that the average life-span of a Benedictine monastery is 250 years. In any case, some of them have lasted four times that long, so I would encourage monastery librarians to take a long-term view when they are going about their censoring; and the same principles would apply to librarians in universities and other ecclesiastical establishments.

Librarians who have the responsibility of deciding what to keep in and what to keep out of their collections are a bit like the fathers (not mothers) of the church who took on the task of deciding what would go into the canon of the scriptures and what would be kept out. Those of us who haven't looked into the Biblical apocrypha and pseudepigrapha might have a vague idea that there is some very weird stuff in those books, and I'm sure that's right. But I'm also sure that there is some very weird stuff also in the books that did make it into the agreed canon of scriptural texts.

Some, but I think not all, of our enterprising publishers do us the honour of allowing us to think for ourselves: so that we can decide for ourselves, they publish versions with and without the apocrypha – that is with and without the approved apocrypha. Approved by whom? I was going to say the generally approved apocrypha, but alas, there isn't any general approval of a canon of non-canonical books.

We sometimes vary the translation of the Bible we read at meals in the monastery refectory. And we sometimes find that the editors and publishers have varied the canon of apocrypha they include between their covers. I don't know how many times I have heard the whole of scripture read in the course of forty-five years of refectory eating, but last time round I was sure I was hearing things I'd never heard

before. The cause of this mystery turned out to be the inclusion of the fourth Book of Esdras in this particular edition of the New Revised Standard Version. I felt a bit the way your oldest customer feels when he complains that you have moved his beloved *Hasting's Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* three meters away from where it has been for the last fifty-seven years.

Another bothersome question that I think librarians should squarely look at is whether you give your public what it wants or give it what it needs. You would expect the teaching staff in your institutions to put the emphasis on what the students need, whether they like it or not; though if the teachers want to be heard, they would be wise to temper the medicine that is needed with some honey of what is wanted. Probably most of us would think the librarians ought generally to mind their own business and not try to influence what the students are choosing to read, so give the public what it wants. But that seems to lower the altruistic spirit of service of the truth, which instinctively I feel is one of the qualities one would look for in a dedicated librarian.

Again it's not a question that belongs only to librarians. Lawyers, journalists and politicians are among those who should be asking themselves the question most frequently, and they are among those who seem to get the answer wrong most frequently. I have yet to find the lawyer who can persuade me that it is morally right to protect a client from just punishment when the lawyer knows that the client is guilty. Our party political democracies unfortunately seem to have got themselves landed with voting systems that ensure that virtually all major issues will be decided on considerations of what will win elections rather than on what will be best for the people.

And then the journalists: I'm sure it does not happen in other states, but the two mass-circulation newspapers in Western Australia make a not inconsiderable revenue from columns of classified advertisements for

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prostitution. That fact co-exists with a certain hypocrisy in the editorial and reporting sections of the papers, by way of selective moral indignation about prostitution. We like to complain about insufficient censorship in the mass media, on the grounds that so many of the public are so gullible. So many of them will think "It's true. I saw it on television." Of course the clientèle of our theological libraries is not gullible. Maybe not in general, but there have been some instances. A former seminarian assured me that his Irish moral theology professor had told his class in all seriousness "It's true. I read it in a book."

To go back to advertisements: I have never done a systematic survey, but I wonder whether libraries in general include classified or even unclassified advertisements in their microfilmed copies of newspapers. Advertisements can reveal a great deal of social history in their own right, and they can help readers to evaluate the seriousness and honesty of what appears in the rest of the publication.

I used to regret the censoring activities of binders who would presume to remove the publishers' advertisements from the front and back of philosophical and theological journals. In the days before the national bibliographical enterprises began, and in the days since they have been privatised and priced out of the range of respectable libraries like ours, the advertisements could be a very useful bibliographical resource.

When I used to make this complaint to my fellow-librarians, some of them would say, "Well, that may be all right for the *Journal of Theological Studies*, but would you want to bind in all the advertisement pages of the *Economist*, for instance?" One part of me says obviously not: if all those advertisements were to be bound, the world itself would not be large enough to contain all the volumes that would have to be shelved. But another part of me says we should not suppress the evidence that shows how much apparently independent and innocent writing in fact depends for its publication on the financial

backing of some very dubious enterprises.

To go back to the prostitutes: I am impressed by the claim made in the Eros Foundation's publication *Hypocrites* in April 2000, that

Australia's Christian churches and the sex industry both employ approximately 20,000 people. Since 1990, the courts have acknowledged 450 child sex assaults against employees of the church and none against the sex industry.⁶

I think the insinuation is probably both true and false. True, and shameful for the churches, for the Roman Catholic church in particular, in that male and female prostitutes seem to leave children alone in a way that the clergy do not. False in that it fails to name the recruitment – to put it gently – of girls and perhaps of some boys to the ranks of prostitutes as a form of child sex assault. However, in this as in many other cases, I would not be in favour of censoring the publication, for fear of losing sight of the truth it contains.

My favourite philosopher Socrates would like me to draw out of this lengthy dialectic of opinions and anecdotes of experience some attempt at a definition of the problem and a solution to it. I had hoped at one stage to be able to establish some principles by which well-disposed librarians might proceed when faced with censorship problems. I have failed to find any such principles. Perhaps there are some already circulating in ethical codes of practice in your profession. If so I would be suspicious of them.

I have arrived at the conclusion I stated at the beginning: that librarians are inevitably censors, that it is desirable that they be aware of that fact, and that they stand to benefit their clients and themselves by keeping the relevant problems under discussion.

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