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# FIGHTING CENSORSHIP IN AMERICA WHO ARE THE REAL CENSORS?

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During the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the American Library Association—through the Office of Intellectual Freedom, the Freedom to Read Foundation and the Intellectual Freedom Action Network (ALA's *Office* 1995, 13) has emerged as one of America's leading opponents of censorship and advocates of free speech. The American Library Association's opposition to censorship is so absolute that it stands firmly against any library restrictions on access to books, magazines or internet sites even by children (*Intellectual* 1996, 84-94; cf. Berry 1998, 6; Mason 1997, 104). There is some evidence, however, to suggest that there is a gap between the official ALA position and actual practice. This essay will survey the American Library Association's position on censorship and will examine the evidence that librarians are among the chief censors.

## INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM MANUAL

The foundation for the American Library Association's stand against censorship and for fair representation of all views is contained in the *Library Bill of Rights*. The *Library Bill of Rights* and its various official interpretations are contained in the *Intellectual Freedom Manual* (1996) compiled by the Office of Intellectual Freedom of the American Library Association. The *Intellectual Freedom Manual* is the virtual bible for American librarians dealing with intellectual freedom issues. The *Intellectual Freedom Manual* contains not only the *Library Bill of*

*Rights* but also the official interpretations of the *Bill of Rights* and the history of each interpretation. The manual also contains the *Freedom to Read* policy statements and history. The manual provides practical help for combating "the censor" in libraries and provides various case studies. The cornerstone, however, is the *Library Bill of Rights*.

Since 1939 the *Library Bill of Rights* has gone through numerous editions, the most recent edition being adopted by the ALA council in 1996. Since the first edition of *The Library Bill of Rights* in 1939, the *Bill* called for the fair and adequate representation of all points of view (*Intellectual* 1996, 6-7, 13-17). The *Bill* further affirmed that materials were not to be excluded from libraries due to the views or doctrines of their authors.<sup>1</sup>

The statements calling for diversity of viewpoints and forbidding the removal of, or failure to select materials due to the views expressed therein were further amplified in a series of official interpretations.<sup>2</sup> The ALA official interpretation entitled *Evaluating Library Collections*, emphasized that the American Library Association opposed what was called silent censorship—the weeding of library materials due to objectionable content (*Intellectual* 1996, 68).<sup>3</sup>

The official interpretation of the *Library Bill of Rights* entitled *Diversity in Collection Development* was even more specific, defining censorship not only in terms of removing unwanted books, but also in terms of failure to select materials due to content. One



specific example of such censorship was the failure to purchase conservative religious materials (*Intellectual* 1996 49).<sup>4</sup> That the failure to purchase conservative religious materials was specifically highlighted as a problem was especially significant in light of the allegations discussed later in this essay, that conservative and religious materials were deliberately excluded from libraries.

The *Diversity in Collection Development* policy actually began in 1971 when the American Library Association Intellectual Freedom Committee met with members of the International Conference of Police Associations over a book for children picturing pigs in police uniforms. The officers asked why librarians often complied with requests to remove the book *Little Black Sambo* when people complained about its being offensive, but strongly refused to remove the book showing pigs in police uniforms. The *Intellectual Freedom Manual* acknowledged that some librarians did employ a double standard in their application of the *Library Bill of Rights* (*Intellectual* 1996, 51).

If the *Library Bill of Rights* is the cornerstone of the American Library Association defense of Intellectual Freedom, the *Freedom to Read* policy statement is one of the pillars. Proposition 1 of the *Freedom to Read* policy stated that librarians should make the "...widest diversity of views..." available, even those which were unpopular (*Intellectual* 1996).<sup>5</sup> The explanatory comments made the point that democracy was strengthened by the freedom to choose between conflicting opinions and that stifling freedom to choose would mark the end of democracy (*Intellectual* 1996 137, 145).

Proposition 3 of the *Freedom to Read* policy states that the acceptability of a book should not be determined on the basis of the personal history or political affiliations of the author.<sup>6</sup> The explanatory remarks said that society could not flourish if it maintained lists of writers to whom it would not listen

(*Intellectual* 1996, 138, 146). While there is not evidence of official lists of religious authors, some evangelicals made allegations that librarians did not consider the works of evangelical authors or publishers. Whether the lists were in writing or not, the result was the same.

Finally, Proposition 7 of the *Freedom to Read* statement emphasized that libraries should provide books that enriched diversity of thought (*Intellectual* 1996, 139, 147).<sup>7</sup> Proposition 7 was explained by saying that freedom to read was frustrated when readers could not obtain the material they wanted (*Intellectual* 1996, 140). The *Freedom to Read* statement further emphasized the American Library Association commitment to providing access to all viewpoints regardless of the view of the author or the popularity of the view.

The *Intellectual Freedom Manual* contains several chapters on practical helps for librarians—chapters on dealing with censors, handling complaints, developing policies, and dealing with pressure groups or, more specifically, conservative Christian pressure groups. The book closed with several chapters providing practical advice on how to get involved in the fight for intellectual freedom.

#### ALA CODE OF ETHICS

The American Library Association official commitment to the fair representation of all views is further expressed in the *American Library Association Code of Ethics*. The *Code of Ethics* states that librarians were not to allow personal bias to interfere with fair representation of materials (*American* 1995, 2).<sup>8</sup> The principle of fair

representation was also illustrated in a presidential speech by Ann Symons of the American Library Association in which she emphasized making a wide range of viewpoints available to library patrons (Symons 1998, 1).<sup>9</sup>

#### INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM PRINCIPLES FOR ACADEMIC LIBRARIES

The Association of College and Research Libraries most recent state-

*In the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the library profession as a whole strongly condemned censorship in any form. The evidence, however, suggests that there is a significant gap between official library profession position and actual practice.*

ment on intellectual freedom was published in the third draft of the Intellectual freedom principles for academic libraries. Statement number 2 emphasized that materials must be acquired representing a variety of perspectives (ACRL 1999, 470).<sup>10</sup>

#### LIBRARIAN SUPPORT

Schrader, Herring, and de Scossa seem to represent librarian views on censorship quite well when they wrote that people must be able to access information on all viewpoints, regardless of how controversial (Schrader, Herring and de Scossa 1989, 420). Will Manley illustrated another aspect of the censorship issue when he wrote that as far as he knew, he was the only person in the library profession who supported censorship (Manley 1990, 122). Manley was no doubt exaggerating, but the point is that the voices against censorship of any kind in the library profession are so overwhelming as to seem almost unanimous.

A 1990 study by Ramsey concluded that the four freedoms<sup>11</sup> adopted by the American Library Association were widely accepted by American colleges



and universities (Ramsey 1990, 34). However, while the American Library Association and its defenders had strongly supported balanced library collections, Selth (1993, 105), wrote that he had never found a serious attempt to justify the need for a balanced collection, nor had he found suggestions on how to create such a balance. Selth's statement, combined with numerous allegations of censorship, necessarily raised the question, was there a gap between official library position and library practice?

### POSITION AND PRACTICE

For years, numerous allegations were made that there was a significant gap between official position and actual practice. The charge was quite serious that the official position against censorship actually functioned as a means to keep selection decisions from being challenged, but the party line did not keep censorship from being practiced on a regular basis by the librarians themselves. The allegations of censorship came both from within and outside of the library profession.

#### • Gordon (1961)

As early as 1961 Gordon charged American libraries with deliberate censorship of conservative books. Among the books cited as examples were *Listen Yankee* by C. Wright and *Red Star over Cuba* by Nathaniel Weyl. According to Gordon, Wright's book was filled with undocumented support for Castro, while Weyl's book was written by an expert on Latin American affairs (Gordon 1961, 591). Gordon found 11 copies of the pro-Castro book *Listen Yankee*, and no copies of *Red Star Over Cuba* in the libraries she surveyed.

Gordon told of a Boston Public library recommended reading list that contained eight books by Communist or pro-Communist authors. Unfortunately, Gordon didn't tell how many books were on the list or how many were anti-Communist, so her statistic was not as helpful as it might have been.

Gordon related how Hugh Smith heard that not one copy of *Red Star Over Cuba* was in a particular California public library system, and checked the San Mateo County Free Library System. He was unable to find the book. When Smith asked why the book was not available, the librarian told him that it had not received favorable book reviews. Smith found out that the San Mateo County Free Library System relied on *Kirkus*, *Library Journal*, *ALA Booklist*, *New York Times Sunday Book Review*, and similar book review sources. The remainder of the article sought to demonstrate that the review sources were biased toward the left.

Whether Gordon was correct in her assessment was uncertain, judging solely on information provided in the article, but her conclusion was valid, i.e. that publicly funded libraries had no right to rely solely on liberal book review sources (Gordon 1961, 694).

#### • Moon and Broderick (1969)

Moon pointed out that while the inclusion of almost any book was justified on the basis of the *Library Bill of Rights*, decisions to exclude books were much harder to justify. When Moon asked librarians why they did not add particular books to their collections, he was surprised by the number who said, in effect, that the book was trash. Moon then pointed out that the same rationale was used by pressure groups attempting to remove books from libraries (Moon 1969, 4). Librarians, of course, did not tell readers they failed to select a book because in their opinion it was objectionable. Instead librarians appealed to a book selection policy.

Broderick (1969, 65) made the observation that it became clear from her study that librarians thought of their book selection policies more as a weapon against attack than as a selection tool.<sup>12</sup> The observation that library book selection policies had more to do with defending librarian book purchasing decisions than with ensuring balanced collections became a

repeated theme in library literature. For example, the year after Moon and Broderick's book was published, LeRoy Merritt, Dean of Librarianship at the University of Oregon, stated explicitly that the first major reason for having a book selection policy was the defense of a selection decision (Merritt 1970, 25).<sup>13</sup>

Marjorie Fiske's study showed that the book selection policy was the most frequently used tool in defending controversial book selection decisions (Fiske 1960, 74, compare Wenk 1986, 48-49). Even the American Library Association's *Workbook for Selection Policy Writing* pointed out that the presence of objectionable material was more easily explained with a book selection policy (American 1980, 1).

Finally, in the *Intellectual Freedom Manual*, the American Library Association's bible on dealing with censorship issues, the very first item in the chapter on *Dealing with Concerns about Library Resources* was to "...maintain a materials selection policy..." (Intellectual 187).<sup>14</sup> In the minds of many librarians a book selection policy had much more to do with defending a librarians selection decision than it did with guidance in the selection of books or the creation of balanced collections.<sup>15</sup> In fact, Moon went on to admit that the sacred cow of balance in library collections, so strongly defended in the *Library Bill of Rights* was, "...indefensible against the evidence of the library shelves...." (Moon 1969, 7).

In Chapter 1 Moon (1969, 13) wrote that liberal-minded librarians repeatedly emphasized that libraries must contain representation of all viewpoints. But he asked whether liberals were only liberal in the things in which they believed. If so, were they not as bad as the censors they condemned?

#### • Falwell (1983)

Jerry Falwell, pastor of Thomas Road Baptist Church, Chancellor of Liberty University, and former head of the Moral Majority charged that liberals



had censored conservative books from library collections (Falwell 1983, 14). Falwell's article was a call for conservatives to flood the nation's libraries to see if conservative books were in the collections. The article included a list of conservative books that, in Falwell's opinion, should have been included in every library.

Unfortunately, while Falwell may have had reasons for his charges, he offered no evidence to support his allegations. His article was simply a call to his supporters to challenge their local libraries.

- *LaRue (1984)*

In James LaRue's 1984 article "Reading with the enemy", the enemy was the Christian right. Even though Mr. LaRue was not writing from a Christian perspective, he admitted that there was some truth in the Christian right's charge that their views were underrepresented in public libraries. LaRue argued that Christians deserved the same privileges as other minority groups (LaRue 1984, 45). The fact that LaRue thought of Christians as a minority group when Barna (1999) reported that 80% of Americans thought of themselves as Christian was an indication of how out of touch some librarians had become.

- *Thomas (1984)*

One of the strongest attacks on the library establishment came from journalist and commentator Cal Thomas. Thomas charged that some of the people or groups that opposed censorship so strenuously were the same ones who posed the greatest threat to free speech. The groups endangered free speech by preventing ideas from getting to the shelves of American libraries (Thomas 1983, 13-14).<sup>16</sup>

Thomas pointed out that according to the *New York Times*, the religious book market in the early 1980s boasted about 800 million in profits, and yet the books were virtually excluded from secular book reviews (Thomas 1983, 98). Thomas also pointed out that best-

seller lists were largely determined by polling certain secular bookstores throughout the country. Since secular stores rarely purchased evangelical books, it was rare that evangelical books appeared on the best seller lists regardless of the number of books sold.

As an example, Thomas pointed out that Jane Fonda's exercise book topped the *New York Times* best-seller list in May 1982, but that Francis Schaeffer's *Christian Manifesto* actually sold twice as many copies that month (Thomas 1983, 104-105).

Further support for Thomas' contention that evangelical books were not reviewed in standard book review sources was provided by Hunter (1991, 244). Hunter stated that evangelical writer Francis Schaeffer sold over 3 million books, none of which were ever reviewed by *Time* or the *New York Times Book Review*. Hunter also pointed out that *The Late Great Planet Earth*, by evangelical writer Hal Lindsey was the number one non-fiction best seller for the entire decade of the 1970s, yet was never reviewed by what Hunter called the literary establishment, and never appeared on any best-seller lists, until the title was picked up by a secular publishing house (Hunter 1991, 244).

Since librarians rely heavily on book reviews and best-seller lists, it is not surprising to find a bias against Christian books in libraries. Even if Thomas' statements about publisher bias were correct, it would not excuse librarians since, as Gordon pointed out, publicly funded libraries had no right to rely solely on liberal book review sources for book purchases (Gordon 1961, 694).

In 1991 Hupp attempted to challenge the conclusions of Falwell and Thomas (Hupp 1991).<sup>17</sup> Hupp checked the holdings of 305 Ohio OCLC<sup>18</sup> participant libraries against a list compiled by Falwell and another list compiled by Charles Willett, who charged that politically liberal books were underrepresented. Hupp's conclusion was that Ohio's libraries

contained more conservative titles than liberal titles and that his findings called into question the attacks by Falwell, Thomas and others.

Hupp's conclusions, however, were seriously flawed. First, the list of liberal books used by Hupp contained only books from small publishers specializing in controversial material, while many titles on the Falwell list were published by commercial presses. Since the vast majority of liberal works published in America came from major publishing houses and these books were not included in the Hupp study, Hupp's conclusion that conservative titles held a two to one advantage over liberal titles in Ohio was, therefore, invalid (Hupp 1991, 145).

Second, of the 305 OCLC libraries surveyed, only 155 libraries, just over half, had any of the books on the Moral Majority list. When religious libraries were excluded, less than half of Ohio's OCLC participant libraries contained any of the books on Falwell's list. To put it more bluntly, the majority of Ohio's OCLC participant libraries did not contain a single book on Falwell's list. It would seem that the data actually supported the allegations of Falwell and Thomas rather than negate them as Hupp contended.

- *Baily (1985)*

Baily, a reference librarian at Sam Houston State University, summarized Thomas' charge and asked whether his charge was legitimate. Baily offered what he called the Cal Thomas test, which was a list of 33 conservative books considered indispensable by the Moral Majority (Baily 1985, 12). Baily challenged librarians to check their collections to see how many of the books were in their collections. Baily's statements made it clear that he was no friend of the Moral Majority, yet he did suspect that Cal Thomas' allegations were accurate. Baily challenged librarians to take Thomas' allegations seriously and to correct the deficiency.

(Continued on page 104.)