

RELIGION AND INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM: A RESPONSE

by Christian Dupont
Director of Patron Services
Department of Special Collections
Hesburgh Library
University of Notre Dame



And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free. These words of Jesus, from the eighth chapter of the Gospel According to John, can help us understand the motivations of those who we are inclined to label as religious censors. For these words express the essential meaning and relation of the concepts of truth and freedom in the religious context: one is not free until one knows the truth about God, about the world and about oneself. A central truth in many religious traditions is that we humans are by nature "fallen," and thus to some degree ignorant and incapable of discovering and knowing truth on our own. Our minds are darkened and our sensibilities depraved. Only an act of revelation, an infusion of divine grace, can fill us with true knowledge. Coming to knowledge of the truth, and the One who is true, frees us from our spiritual bondage and intellectual darkness. Only then, and hence only by believers, can a claim be made to the kind of freedom described in the Gospel According to John.

Freedom in the religious context has strong, positive meaning. By contrast, librarians and others who use the phrase "intellectual freedom" typically have in mind a weaker or negative notion of freedom, as in "Congress shall make no law..." Freedom of speech, freedom of the press and the freedom to read are viewed as basic rights belonging to every individual that should never be taken away or limited by any authority, governmental, religious or otherwise. Intellectual freedom in this respect has a negative meaning insofar as it is freedom from something: freedom from constraint, freedom from coercion, etc. To say it has a negative meaning is not to downplay its importance, but rather to point out how it differs from religious notions of freedom, whereby believers do not simply claim that they have certain freedoms, but rather that they are free. Put another way, freedom in the religious sense is primarily internal, pertaining to the being of believer, whereas intellectual freedom is primarily external, deriving from a set of legal concepts and societal relations.

If it were not for the fact that intellectual freedom was not already a well-established rallying cry with a distinguished history of safeguarding important civil rights, it would seem more appropriate to speak of the cause of intellectual liberty. Liberty better denotes the passive state of being able to act without fear of repression. Yet if it is too late to change our terminology, let us at least be careful to distinguish what we may mean by freedom from what someone else may mean. Although it may seem quite repugnant and even contradictory for someone that we label a religious censor to demand that a certain title be withdrawn from a library's collection in the name of religious freedom, this might not be a contradiction from the censor's point of view. The person who, on the grounds of his religious consciousness, seeks to ban a particular book might regard it as a dangerous stumbling block to others on the road to truth, and hence an obstacle to their ultimate freedom. I do not mean here to either condone or excuse censorship in the name of religion, but instead to try to explain one of its manifestations and motives.

Although I would suggest that what we commonly refer to as intellectual freedom may be better termed intellectual liberty, I do not mean to imply that the advocate of intellectual liberty cannot or does not also have a concept of freedom in a strong, positive sense. Many people fight vigorously to protect the societal liberty to read or publish whatever one may want, as long as it does not libel another, not just as an end in itself. Rather it is to make possible what Archer refers to as "informed speculation," which is to say the formation of an opinion based upon an examination of facts. This informed opinion is the typically the underlying goal. If one has the liberty to read everything available on a given topic, but does not exercise that right, one cannot possibly become informed. If one is not informed, then one's opinion is neither as defensible or as potentially useful to society as the opinion of someone who is fully informed. Liberty thus ideally leads to knowledge and knowledge, more ideally still, will make one an enlightened person. Enlightened

persons, sharing their opinions in a free and open dialogue, will lead, most ideally yet, to the formation of an enlightened society. For both historical and philosophical reasons, I believe that enlightenment is really the most appropriate term to distinguish the ultimate goal sought by many advocates of intellectual liberty. As a product of intellectual liberty, enlightenment can be used to express certain essential or spiritual qualities, freedom in a strong, positive, albeit not religious, sense being one of them.

We may now associate the above distinctions into an analogous set of relations: enlightenment is to intellectual liberty as truth is to religious freedom. If we can grasp this analogy, we will see that advocates for both sides are engaged in a fundamentally spiritual struggle. The librarian, like the parson, strives upward. Yet while fighting on a common plane, they are not engaged in the same war. The two sides may come into conflict over an issue; a collection of books or a library and its services may become the scene of a battle. Yet societal or secular enlightenment and religious truth are not equivalent. We should therefore be careful not to equivocate when using words like "intellectual" and "freedom." As Archer notes, religious motivations for shaping collections and reading habits have been and will continue to be with us. If there is any hope for finding a common cause beyond the common ground we share, that spiritual plane on which we as human beings live and strive, it will surely depend upon recognizing precisely how we differ in our concepts and beliefs.

