

Fall 1999

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Reading Between Librarians' Lines

Mark Y. Herring

It is a well known fact that librarians, as professionals go, are not among the world's most demonstrative people. I can say that with impunity because I am one. It's one thing for a man to slight his own profession; quite another when someone else presumes to do it. But given that librarians are a placid sort, just mention the phrase "intellectual freedom," or utter the word "censorship," and the usually calm demeanor of the librarian becomes as agitated as the water between Charybdis and Scylla! This article addresses three aspects of the issue of intellectual freedom and attempts to define the difference between the phrases "free speech" and "free expression." First to be explored will be the nature of intellectual freedom as defined by the American Library Association's *Intellectual Freedom Manual*; second, the underlying philosophy implicit in that expression; and third, an alternative to both the manual, and its philosophical presuppositions.

ALA's Intellectual Freedom Manual

Librarians are rightly concerned about the right to read. Reading, as the commercial says, *is* fundamental, the mark of education, the beginning of culture, the end of barbarism. All of this should be granted, and not merely for the sake of the argument. One would be hard-pressed to find an opponent who could argue convincingly (and be taken seriously) that reading is bad, a mark of foolishness or a terrible time-waster. But librarians, as represented by the American Library Association (hereafter, ALA) and its Office of Intellectual Freedom's *Intellectual Freedom Manual*, go one step

further, some would say a step over the edge of reason. In the ALA's hands, reading is not merely fundamental; it's totalitarian. The ALA defines intellectual freedom and a free speech in absolutist terms.

For the more or less faithful 50,000 plus professional librarians in America, the *Intellectual Freedom Manual* (hereafter, the *IFM*) is the Association's "Twelve Tablets." For librarians, the *IFM* presents itself as the *only* word regarding the profession's stance on intellectual freedom, censorship, and related concerns. Indeed, the most recent revision of the *IFM* contains not only the ALA's stance on intellectual freedom but also its advice on how to handle censors, how to write a legislator about materials under attack, how to deal with the community and the press, and other information regarding what librarians should do when materials come under attack by would-be censors. It's no wonder ALA gives librarians what amounts to intellectual combat gear. Once the inevitable barrage of complaints that are sure to follow public disclosure of the manual's contents are more generally known, librarians will need it.

One does not have to wait long for dangerous and irrational pronouncements on intellectual freedom in the ALA's publication. In the introduction intellectual freedom is defined as,

"[T]he right of any person to believe whatever he wants on any subject, and to express his beliefs or ideas *in whatever way he thinks appropriate* (emphasis added).

If one supposes that only good people existed, that evil is unreal or merely an unreified philosophical construct, or that men were angels, such a statement might be ignored. But to argue this in a world rife with examples to the contrary is to baffle reason with naivete, or worse. Subtlety, the ALA takes free speech (i.e. ideas), a right promised by our Constitution, and convolutes and exchanges it for the indefensible phrase “free expression.”

When freedom of ideas becomes freedom of expression only lawlessness and libertinage prevails. For free ideas are governed by law, restricting the speaker to certain modalities of speech and differentiating for him between ideas that are harmful, and ideas that are salubrious. Freedom of expression, on the other hand, allows for *any* unrestrained utterance, something not intended by Constitution. The interpretation of the First Amendment as freedom of expression over freedom of ideas has also infected our judicial branch of government as witnessed by recent decisions that equate flag-burning and nude dancing as protected “expressions.” Yet at the same time, this same court has ruled against its own definition of free expression. See for example, *Roth v. United States*, *Memoirs v. Massachusetts*, *Miller v. California* and *Beauharnis v. Illinois*. In the first three cases, the Supreme Court upholds the notion that there are in fact some ideas (in these cases, pornographic and obscene ones) that are not protected. In the last case, it upholds the startling (to some) notion that even some *political* ideas are not protected. None of these cases has been overturned.

As if fearful anyone will miss the absolutist interpretation of the First Amendment, the well-intentioned authors of the *Intellectual Freedom Manual* clarify the issue by adding that such expressions may be made “through a chosen mode of communication.” The weight of ignominy this phrase allows is irresponsible and lawless. Is it any wonder that the local public library is chock full of books of dubious merit and questionable value? Or that the ALA has resisted in court *any* attempts to filter libraries free access to the Internet’s pornography? Reading is culture, as Matthew Arnold rightly pointed out, but one wonders how it is possible under this chaos of expression. Again, freedom of ideas will incite those to fight for it; freedom of expression only incites the many to fight against it. The two are as different as equal opportunity and equal outcomes.

Implicit in the *IFM*’s philosophy is the notion that *all* forms of communication (i.e. expressions) must be made available in libraries and, further, that those

forms must be available to everyone, regardless of race, color, creed, even *age*. Waxing Socratic on the idea of freedom and the intellect, the *IFM* muses on the nature of democracy in its now famous (to librarians, anyway) “Freedom to Read” statement. The statement is meant to be one of the pivotal supporting documents of intellectual freedom espoused by the ALA, and is included in the *IFM*. The authors contend,

Freedom is no freedom if it is accorded only to the accepted and the inoffensive.... We realize that the application of these propositions may mean the dissemination of ideas and manners of expression that are repugnant to many persons [sic]. We do not state these propositions in the comfortable belief that what people read is unimportant. We believe rather that what people read is deeply important; that ideas can be dangerous; but suppression of ideas is fatal to a democratic society. Freedom is a dangerous way of life, but it is ours.

No doubt exists that our founding fathers knew that liberty was a “dangerous way of life,” especially to oppressive forms of government. One wonders, however, if they suspected that freedom itself, described in definitions such as this one, would ever be twisted into democracy’s worst enemy.

The *IFM* strays farther still from the center. Judith F. Krug, of the Office of Intellectual Freedom of the ALA, and James A. Harvey, gloss the history of censorship in an exegetical manner, making certain no librarian will miss what is at the heart of these matters. Having discussed in earlier pages the nature of freedom and the consequences of any other form of intellectual freedom but the most absolutist, the *IMF* spells it out in black and white:

The catalyst spurring librarians to take initial steps toward supporting intellectual freedom was the censorship of specific publications. “Censorship” in this context means not only deletion or excision of parts of published materials, but also efforts to ban, prohibit, suppress, proscribe, remove, label, or restrict materials.... Censorship denies the opportunity to choose from all possible alternatives, and thereby violates intellectual freedom.

This grants librarians the authority to purchase all manner of insipid materials while creating a philosophy of librarianship that allows the librarian to sup-

port, or ignore, *any* ideology he or she wishes. Such is the condition of our libraries and the philosophy to which each librarian is encouraged to lend his intellectual weight and support. Hope for our nation's libraries, and for our intellectual culture is thereby weakened. Under such a regime where there are admittedly good and bad books, admittedly good and bad ideas are given equal weight, culture stands to lose; meanwhile the Good, as Aristotle defined it, gets a black eye.

Oddly enough, the early history of librarianship does not demonstrate such philosophical recklessness. In an address given in 1895 by then ALA president Joseph Nelson Larned before an annual gathering of librarians, a far different philosophy is espoused. Larned counseled librarians to "... judge books with an adequate knowledge and sufficient hospitality of mind; exercise a just choice among them without offensive censorship; defend [your] shelves against the endless siege of vulgar literature." In 1908, Arthur E. Bostwick, another ALA president, told the annual gathering that:

Some are born great; some achieve greatness; some have greatness thrust upon them." It is in this way that the librarian has become a censor of literature.... Books that distinctly commend what is wrong, that teach how to sin and tell how pleasant it is, sometimes with and sometimes without the added sauce of impropriety, are increasingly popular, tempting the author to imitate them, the publishers to produce, the bookseller to exploit. Thank Heaven they do not tempt the librarian.

Unfortunately, the temptation has not only overtaken the ALA, it has made an acolyte of it. In less than a century, librarians have moved from arguing that library shelves must be defended against a recognized "siege of vulgar literature," to the untenable philosophical position of supporting *any mode* of expression. The *IFM* has been instrumental in this change. Indeed, the ALA is evangelical in its zeal to protect all expression including pornography. It is this metanoia, this change from a recognition of bad books and bad ideas, to a dismissal of such charges because they violate free speech and intellectual freedom, that has gripped American librarianship by the spine and threatens to unbind it.

Today, library materials with offensive ideas and repugnant manners are eagerly added to the idea-mines of culture. These materials, according to the defini-

tions of intellectual freedom given by the *IFM* cannot, must not, be censored. Censorship is a far greater crime than any bad ideas, than any subversive, rabble-rousing philosophies, a position that leads one inevitably to conclude that the ALA secretly believes that ideas do not have consequences. For although the manual contends that it does not rest "... in the comfortable belief that what people read is unimportant," and that it believes "what people read is deeply important," it nevertheless will not take up a proposition so axiomatic that even Schopenhauer gave vent to it.

Schopenhauer readily saw that the state of literary affairs could not be expected to remain unblemished by the shoddy or the corrupt. Wrote Schopenhauer, "If a man wants to read good books, he must make a point of avoiding bad ones; for life is short, and time and energy limited." Elsewhere he goes on to point out that, "You can never read bad literature too little, nor good literature too much. Bad books are intellectual poison; they destroy the mind." The idea that we must discriminate between good and bad materials between good and bad ideas is as basic to the First Amendment as proofs are to geometry. Nevertheless, the ALA obliterates this basic notion. Bad books may be intellectual poison and may very well destroy the mind. But it's a small price to pay in order to offer all kinds of expressions in any mode of communication.

The notion that libraries should house the best that the minds of men can offer the ALA deems as *demode* and antiquarian. The ALA argues that such "elitist" notions will lead to rampant censorship, unrestrained labeling, and the wholesale sequestration of books. No, such a philosophy cannot be allowed to prevail. The only cure for it is complete and unrestricted freedom of expression. Indeed, for ALA there has not yet been produced anything bad enough to warrant separate shelving. Whatever caprice may strike the author, whatever whim may catch his fancy, it is intellectual "food" for thought and promulgation. Whatever may be conceived of, said the philosopher Leibnitz, is conceivable. The ALA goes one step further: whatever may be conceived should also be printed. This may help to explain why so many of our nation's libraries shelves are filled with the latest pant and puff novel from the current author of tease. As will be explained later on, it also helps to explain why our nation's library shelves grow increasingly bare of conservative classics of intellectual thought and culture.

Moreover, the issue of what is to be read is left to the governing idea of "anything goes." This is clear from the manual's "Free Access to Libraries for Mi-

nors" statement. The impact of this "anything goes" philosophy shows its full, horrible force against ideas. Libraries that deny certain materials to minors, either by labeling them as possibly offensive, or restricting them to a sequestered place in the library, "... are not in accord with the Library Bill of Rights and are opposed by the American Library Association." The *IFM* continues:

Restrictions take a variety of forms, including, among others, restricted reading rooms for adult use only, library cards limiting circulation of some materials to adults only, closed collections for adult use only, collections limited to teacher use, or restricted according to a student's grade level, and interlibrary loan service for adult use only.

Further, in the manual's "Library's Bill of Rights" alluded to above, librarians are warned that "A person's right to use a library should not be denied or abridged because of origin, age, background, or views." In one broad stroke the ALA has allowed for not only the inclusion in libraries of publications like *The Joys of Gay Sex*, but also has urged their circulation even to minors. Additionally, it vouchsafes as a "right" of every pubescent and prepubescent teenager unfettered access to pornography via the Internet.

With the recent advent of videos into library acquisitions, minors need wait for only a few months to see "R" and perhaps even "NC-17" rated movies they were restricted from seeing when released. Moreover, they will view these movies at taxpayer's expense since most libraries circulate these materials free of charge. But won't librarians be required by the motion picture industry's own rating of these movies to deny minors such access, regardless of their manual's philosophical positions? Not at all. The ALA, in conjunction with the motion picture industry's ratings committee, continues to seek removal of the accompanying codes before the videos enter the library.

Philosophical Underpinnings

What is the underlying idea of this stated philosophy, a philosophy that mocks those who hold to the idea that truth is absolute, and applauds the mediocre in print, while allowing minors access to pornography? The ALA embraces, knowingly or unknowingly, a well-established but erroneous philosophical viewpoint: emotivism. Emotivism, as expressed by R.M. Hare, G. E. Moore, and A. J. Ayer, rejects clearly proven moral values as subjective intellectual entities.

Emotivism predicates statements of moral principle as issuing from the speaker's preferences rather than from objective formulations of the truth. Consequently, when a speaker states a position of absolute truth or moral value, he is merely enucleating *his* own preference. Once understood as preferences, these claims cannot be posited as objective moral statements. They must be vouchsafed as the "speaker's choice." Based on this understanding, all ideas and expressions, and even the dangerous "any mode of communication," must be granted. Marxist overtones are also extant: heretofore philosophy merely interpreted life; the time now has come to *change it*.

If this is the state of ideas, then it follows that ideas do not necessarily have consequences, or, if they do, they must be treated equally, and without favor. My preference is simply as good (or as bad, who knows, for no one can tell for certain) as yours. Moral values can be seen as philosophical curiosities to be studied at arm's length. They can be asserted or denied but the assertions of one cannot take precedence over those of another.

Such is the world of ideas as seen by the authors of the ALA's *IFM*. Moral values, such as those argued for by the founding fathers of this country, are expressions of what those fathers preferred. It matters not that those same values, at least until this era, have been considered essential to the good life. These values are, argues the *IFM*, all very well and good, but they cannot take priority over any other values, especially contradictory ones. Consequently, the librarian must gather together materials dealing with *all* aspects of every form of cerebral life. Every notion in the field of ideas, once published, becomes potentially purchasable material. The contentions of P.T. Geach (in his work *The Virtues*) and Richard John Neuhaus (in his book *The Naked Public Square*), that without some visible standard of moral absolutes in public dealings, our social structure will crumble is passed over as so many more expressions of speaker preferences. But one wonders whether in this Nietzschesque world created by the *IFM* if even Nietzsche would agree to live.

This view of ideas argues against the existence of evil, a reality that Karl Barth said is in "every honest interpretation of all of history." It sneers down its nose at values as something that are the children of an addled brain at best, or the offspring of some beast of burden at worst. It may not blatantly sneer in the free marketplace of ideas but it effects the same by restricting absolute values and absolute truth to areas outside the intellectual coliseum. Values can no longer be

identified under this scheme with any sort of confidence. All attempts at values, even the ravings of a madman, must be given equal weight. Have we come to so confused a state of affairs that the untutored in values will teach the tutored, when the mad will lead the sane, and when good and bad literature is indistinguishable from each other?

Alasdair MacIntyre, in his book *After Virtue*, warned of the consequences of indolent moral thinking. His claim that “we have very largely, if not entirely, lost our comprehension both theoretical and practical, of morality” can clearly be seen in the ALA’s *IFM*. And although MacIntyre argues for a return to the Aristotlean mean (an odd recommendation for an age that cannot seem to understand even the basic tenets of a simple, spiritual faith), the results of his contention are very clear. The ALA requires librarians to select everything for fear of censoring anything because the ALA is morally bankrupt.

In an effort to make its argument more generally acceptable, the ALA issued “Diversity in Collection Development,” a document that purports to encourage wide selection in all areas. Inherent in this document are the notes for more of the same doxology of preference and free expression, and a way of escape from the criticisms of Russell Kirk, James Fitzpatrick, and others, viz., that our nation’s libraries are strong on left-of-center interpretations of history, weak on right-of-center explanations of same.

The document begins innocently enough, lamenting that censorship is as old as time, pausing only long enough to reflect each generation’s “preferences.” Materials have been restricted because the contents fly in the face of received opinion. Because this is merely the received preference, according to the *IFM*, librarians therefore

... have a professional responsibility to be inclusive, not exclusive, in collection development and in the provision of interlibrary loan. Access to all materials legally obtainable should be assured to the user and policies should not unjustly exclude materials even if offensive to the librarian or the user.... Libraries should provide materials presenting all points of view on current and historical issues.... A balanced collection reflects a diversity of materials, *not an equality of numbers* (emphasis added).

A strong collection is a balanced one, not in numbers, but in “diversity,” a diversity determined by the same librarian trained to view free expression in light of

the *IFM*’s philosophy. Diversity of materials becomes the sole responsibility of the librarian. And she can, if she so desires, determine that “selection” (a term whose effects render a different kind of censorship) in a given area is equitable and diverse enough, *regardless of the balance of numbers*.

It is this dichotomy that makes of the librarian an advocate of diversity while also making him an effective censor. To get around this paradox, librarians change the meaning of terms so far used. The little old lady toting a purse the size of a rail car, leading a carping vanguard from the local Primitive Baptist Church, and determined as Carrie Nation to see that her local public library maintains the virtues with which she grew up, is a censor; the librarian, who for the most part chooses much of this material to begin with, is a “selector,” a *professional selector*. If a librarian chooses to “balance” the purchase of *Mother Jones* by adding *Newsweek*, then the library becomes diverse in its collection, offering both left-of-center and right-of-center viewpoints. It does not matter that the “balance” is not a fine one. Wishing makes it so. Because there is implicit in this assumption an infallibility on the part of the librarian, no one, least of all community patrons, may call it into question. If too many patrons attempt to call a certain item into question, librarians change the argument back to its philosophical base: this is but one voice among many voices. No need to worry.

Of course it’s silly to argue that when librarians censor materials it’s good, when patrons question selection it’s bad. One cannot have it both ways: bad censorship issuing from community patrons, beneficial “selection” flowing from a professional elite. The “logic” of the manual, however, is responsible for such effusions because it distinguishes between selection and censorship by electing the one and sneering at the other.

Others are less coy. John Swan, another librarian who has presided as chairman of the ALA’s Intellectual Freedom committee, wrote in *Library Journal* (October 1, 1979):

[C]ensorship must remain the *bête noire* of every librarian who takes freedom of access seriously, but the librarian must fight censorship with the consciousness that to a degree that fight must be carried on from within the beast itself. The librarian is caught in an acute paradox as a censor who must oppose censorship.

Indeed, the “acute paradox” is an intellectually terminal one. A librarian who is intolerant of censorship

from the public cannot expect the public to be tolerant of his own censorship—especially since it must not only be tolerated but also applauded. The effect of such thinking is to reduce intellectual fare in our nation's libraries to biased flummery.

It's irrational to argue that in order for the intellect to be truly free we must allow for every intellectually bad, morally unsound, and socially defective idea that surfaces be given the same attention as ideas which are intellectually good, morally sound, and socially uplifting. Proponents of this absolutist interpretation of free speech must never have been harmed by a bad idea, or never knew it when they were. Pornography and other subversive materials are then given free rein as far as the librarian's view of diversity prescribes. Can we rest confident on this his view alone?

Not when one considers that librarians at annual meetings have viewed U.S. involvement in Vietnam a disgrace while withholding an opinion on Pol Pot; accepted and promulgated homosexual and lesbian lifestyles while condemning Coloradans for exercising their right to vote against homosexual favoritism, one quickly comes to the conclusion that diversity of collection will yield a politically correct library. Guided by this left-of-center *Weltanschauung*, librarians will seek "diversity." No wonder authors such as Kirk and Fitzpatrick, mentioned earlier, complained that conservative materials are sadly lacking from our nation's libraries.

Surely there must be a better way. An alternative to the ALA's *IFM* is outlined below and satisfactorily answers charges from both the left and the right. From the left, that *any* censorship will result in wholesale losses, and from the right, that the present "anything goes" approach makes libraries veritable storehouses of the morally weak and reprobate.

An Alternative

So, where does this leave us? Either we accept the notion of truth as articulated by the ALA's *IFM* and agree that librarians can best judge diversity, or we offer a more viable alternative. Will not censorship be laid at the feet of this idea as well? Will not the argument that truth in the free marketplace of ideas will out, prevail over the one that rebuts that truth must be assisted, like any good army, with the proper supports? While such cavils will doubtless be raised, empirical evidence has already silenced them. Under the ALA's free marketplace of ideas, truth is straight-jacketed while verisimilitude runs rampant. William

Bennett, among others, has pointed out our nation's decline in nearly every sociological category—violent crime, poor schools, ubiquitous immorality on television and in movies—over the past thirty years.

Pivotal to the ALA's manual is the notion that truth cannot not be known; that truth's ways are beyond knowing. In order to preserve truth no restrictions must be employed on any expression, however vile, however unpleasant since no one can say for sure just where truth will be found lurking. But is this really the way we find truth working in our lives? Are we really so benighted as to be unable to distinguish truth from falsehood and so must embrace both? Such thinking is but more fallout from the so-called Enlightenment that teaches us to doubt first in order to know. Newman, in his *Idea of a University*, argues compellingly against such nonsense. We can know without doubting first, and that knowing is liberating.

The alternative is a simple one that has been with us for centuries. But as Johnson points out in the preface to his dictionary, what is known is not what is always obvious, and what is obvious is not always what is known. We begin with a distinction between freedom of ideas and freedom of expression by using an objective standard. The solution runs as follows.

Men have for all ages agreed that the seven virtues, consisting of the four cardinal ones of courage, justice, temperance, and patience, and the three theological ones of faith, hope and charity, are the building blocks of the good society. Without them liberty, truth, and moral value will not survive for long. A much wiser approach to the First Amendment is to construct our libraries around these four cardinal virtues and the three theological ones, collecting only what exemplifies these. We may chant the oft-quoted truism "truth will out" forever, but it will not undo the empirical evidence of cultural disaster that is postmodern America. The *Kulturkampf* has not only been waged; it has been waged and lost. Approaching the First Amendment via these seven virtues is my Marshall Plan for library restoration. The seven virtues strike me as the right antidote to the poison that education inculcates and the ALA perpetuates.

Michele Kahmi, in her article "Censorship vs Selection-Choosing Books for Schools," in *American Education* (March 1982), pinpoints the pivotal concern of modernity when discussing censorship:

Despite much confusion and heated debate over exactly what actions constitute censorship, the term is abhorrent to most Americans. So in-

grained in us are the ideals of free speech and a free press, that even those who would impose some limits on freedom of expression are loath to see themselves as censors.

It is the *term* that most of us find abhorrent, not the act. What we envision when we hear the word censorship is the loss of every picturesque verb of Shakespeare and every other line of Goya. But rarely is this the case. One must bear in mind two startling points when addressing censorship: no less a mind than Plato's enjoined it, and the word has acquired its wholly negative connotation *only* during this century. Could Plato and 2,000-plus years of history have been so obviously wrong?

Furthermore, the beauty of the seven-virtues view of the First Amendment is that it constricts only where necessary. It allows, when legally permissible, for the publication of even "subversive" materials. It does not seek to restrict from promulgation even pornographic ones. Rather it prohibits their purchase for our nation's libraries. Anyone who wishes to cobble together his own personal library of the paraphiliac may do so but under one condition: he does it at *his* own expense. By restricting the purchase of such materials we remove the patina of respectability they acquire when found in a library.

Opponents, doubtless, will argue that such a plan imposes an impossibility for it requires that we can know truth and further, that there is someone who will act as a reasonable *arbiter elegantiae* for our libraries. Two arguments rebut these concerns. First, libraries *already* act as the *arbiter elegantiae* in society, although admittedly easily since they collect everything for fear of censoring much of anything, but guided, remember, by "diversity." Second, those who cannot know the truth, or argue that it cannot be known, need not apply. We do not ask those who are incompetent in math to teach it (or, at least we didn't used to), or those who are squeamish about laws to enforce them. Why should we ask those admittedly ignorant of moral rectitude to guide us to same?

History is a record of the triumph of truth; it is also a record of the devastating effects of bad ideas when they were allowed free and unrestricted access. History records for us that truth did not "will out" without considerable blood, toil, sweat and tears.

Truth surfaced, not because it's unsinkable and unflappable, but, as Burke said, because good men were unwilling to do nothing. The charge that to censor one thing will lead to a censorship of all, or will place us on the slippery slope to fascism or totalitarianism, is ludicrous. Our history is replete with examples of the successful and necessary practice of censorship at various levels with undeniably positive outcomes.

Either we leave our nation's libraries to collect the good and the godless that abounds from an absolutist view of the First Amendment, or we take up arms against this sea of troubles and in our opposition end them. We demand no less than that our culture reflect that which is the best in us. If we continue to delay, we will leave to coming generations veritable storehouses of intellectual and cultural tastelessness, not that which has been the touchstone of human worth: the good, the true, and the beautiful that issues forth from the human spirit in its search for truth.

SUGGESTED FURTHER READINGS

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