

Sunday September 29, 2013

Taking away your freedom to read

By Jim Taylor

Perhaps you hadn't noticed -- last week was Banned Books Week.

In the U.S., that is. Canada doesn't have a Banned Books Week. Not that we don't have people trying to ban books. In recent years, some Canadians have tried to ban everything from the Bible to a children's book about penguins.

However, Canadians seem more likely to celebrate the printed word than to ban it. This month, Vancouver held a five-day festival called (logically enough) WORD. Toronto marked the 24th year of its Word on the Street event -- also put on in Lethbridge, Saskatoon, Kitchener, and Halifax. Several cities, including Kelowna, marked Raise a Reader Day.

And Freedom to Read week occurs each February.

I could probably write a column on what these approaches reveals about the differing mindsets of Canada and the United States, but what interests me more is the mindset that wants to ban books.

Book banners usually present their demands as a noble desire to protect impressionable young minds from unsuitable material. National Public Radio's Bill Moyers replies that attempts to ban books "have nothing to do with the community, the school, or the reader -- and everything to do with prejudice."

Webster's International Dictionary -- now there's a book full of dangerous ideas! -- defines "prejudice" as "a feeling of dislike ... for someone or something, especially when it is not reasonable or logical."

Precisely -- the book banners dislike something. Usually not so much what a book says as the way it says it. It uses words and descriptions of which they disapprove. That, they feel, gives them the right to deny others the possibility of reading it.

What they don't like

Banning books is, I suppose, slightly less final than burning them. The Mayan civilization of Central America remains shrouded in mystery largely because the Spanish conquistadors burned all but four of the sacred Mayan texts.

A few current fanatics like Islamophobic pastor Terry Jones of Florida tried to do the same with the Qur'an.

More commonly, special interest groups lobby library and school boards to restrict or remove certain titles from public access.

The American Library Association has published a list of more than 11,300 books "challenged" since 1982, when Banned Books Week began.

Not surprisingly, these challenges include Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf* and Karl Marx's *Das Kapital*.

I can also see some rationale for challenging books that attack western civilization, such as George Orwell's *1984*, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, and Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*.

Of course, the entire Harry Potter series by J.K. Rowling is portrayed as promoting witchcraft.

But *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and *King Lear*, by William Shakespeare? *Alice in Wonderland*? *Black Beauty*? *The Color Purple*?

And what is it about Judy Blume's childhood classic, *Are You There, God? It's Me, Margaret*, that gets up some people's nose?

The source of complaints

To quote Moyers again, “Some of the most inspiring and mind-opening words ever written, [are] threatened with removal because they offend a self-deputized vigilante who wants to deny an entire community's curiosity and passion to learn.”

It's not as if Judy Blume or Lewis Carroll advocate drug addiction, financial fraud, or the violent overthrow of government. You won't find instructions in these books on how to build a nuclear bomb, create poison gas, or organize a terrorist cell. For that, you can merely Google the Internet.

The lists of books most often challenged has some interesting omissions. Apparently no one has objected to the self-justifying autobiographies of G.W. Bush, Richard Nixon, or Ronald Reagan. Or to Milton Friedman's economic theories. Or to anything by Ayn Rand.

From those omissions, I infer that most of the challenges come from the political right. And indeed, when I look at last year's list of most challenged books, I find that eight out of ten were challenged for being sexually explicit.

That fits well with what Bible scholar Marcus Borg called “the Republican obsession with crotch issues.”

Reading about sex

From the sociological studies I've seen, today's young people already have far more explicit sex in their lives than anything they're likely to read in a book. So much for protecting impressionable young minds.

My own hormones were running fairly high – yes, I can remember that far back – when Canada relaxed restrictions on some sexually explicit materials in the 1960s. For the first time, I could read *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. And I remember sniggering over a novel named *Candy*.

But you know something? Reading about sex can get boring. Sex can't salvage sloppy writing.

By contrast, only one out of ten books on last year's list was challenged for too much violence. I guess making mayhem is okay; making love isn't.

As Bill Moyers says, “Censorship is the enemy of truth -- even more than a lie. A lie can be exposed; censorship can prevent us knowing the difference.”

Do your part to defeat prejudice – read a banned book today.

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YOUR TURN

To say that I struggled with last week's column on the Quebec Charter of Values that prohibits overt religious symbols and clothing would be an understatement – but I only have a limited number of words in which to express my thoughts. So I'm grateful to those who recognize the complexity of the issues, and who supplement my comments with their own insights.

Judyth Mermelstein wrote from Montreal, “I think your column was a pretty accurate assessment. The thing is, there seem to me to be two currents behind this ‘charter of values’ thing:

1) The old fear that the descended-from-the-habitants culture will be lost if the new Quebecers of all languages, races, religions, colours and ethnic groups are allowed to express their values freely and, in the fullness of time, create the polyglot cosmopolitan culture we already see in Montreal.

2) The relatively new (12 years?) panic over Islam as somehow aimed at 'taking over' and imposing Sharia law on all of Quebec.

"Note that both of these play well with the less-educated and those who have little or no contact with other cultural communities, primarily outside of Montreal -- especially in the rural areas where government and business have been effective at keeping minorities out.

"But Montreal has its ignorant bigots, too -- some of made a point of harassing a hijab-wearing Muslim woman who walked by on the street.

"Muslim women are definitely getting the worst of it -- idiots telling them to 'go back to your country' and demanding they take off their hijabs even where they would still be entitled to wear them under the charter. But kipa-wearing Jewish men are having problems, too, and it's likely to be even worse for the Hasids, who are already being targetted for being allowed extra parking around their synagogues on high holidays, and who complain every year about the Hebrew on matzoh boxes in the grocery stores."

John Willems, from Medicine Hall, commented, "I am not an authority on the Charter of Values but it seems to me that it really is a charter of misconduct from the religion of none."

The "nones" are not actually the fastest growing group, in terms of percentage growth, Steve Roney told me. "The fastest growing religious group in Canada is Islam. You should also be aware that saying you have no religious affiliation on the census does not necessarily mean you are secular in mind, but may simply mean that you do not belong to any one particular church. You might still be devout.

"A recent piece in First Things pointed out that it is not the Sikh turban that is a religious expression. It is the prohibition on cutting the hair. The turban merely serves to discreetly conceal this. Ban the turban, and Sikh men will actually become more conspicuously Sikh."

Art Gans had "A couple of ideas to add to your column today. The oldest law guaranteeing religious freedom is the 1st Amendment of the US Constitution adopted in 1787. It predates the French Revolution by a couple of years. It has two parts concerning religion, namely 'Congress shall make no law establishing a religion,' and further, 'nor any law preventing the free exercise thereof.' The latter is just as important to freedom of religion as the former. There is no freedom of religion in a place where the government can, by law prevent the free exercise of a religion. This is what Quebec intends to do with its so-called Charter of Quebec Values."

Heather Nemeth wrote, "I thought at first that I knew where I stood on this issue but after reading the entire article, I am less sure. I guess life would be simpler if no one was wearing these religious identities. Much more thought is required and it is a difficult decision."

And DaveDenholm made the whole thing perfectly clear: "If I believe in nothing, then I must wear/declare something, so that I do not wear nothing as a religious symbol/statement about what I don't believe..."

Several readers wrote, disagreeing with Miriam Bowles description of the biblical "calamus" as an old name for marijuana. Jack Drieger, for example, noted that "the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, Exodus 30:23 reads 'sweet smelling cinnamon' instead of 'sweet calamus'."

I looked "calamus" up in Wikipedia, which tells me that it is a wetland rhizome, with a host of other names: beewort, bitter pepper root, calamus root, flag root, gladdon, myrtle flag, myrtle grass, myrtle root, myrtle sedge, pine root, rat root, sea sedge, sweet cane, sweet cane, sweet cinnamon, sweet grass, sweet myrtle, sweet root, sweet rush, and sweet sedge.

OLD BOOKS AVAILABLE

I have a couple of boxes of old books that belonged to my father and grandfather. As near as I can tell, the oldest is a Shorter Catechism from 1863, the newest a 1994 text by John Polkinghorne. If you're interested in any of them, please let me know and I will send you an Excel spreadsheet with the full list of books – all I ask is that you pay for shipping.

TECHNICAL STUFF

This column comes to you using the electronic facilities of Woodlakebooks.com.

If you want to comment on something, send a message directly to me, at jimt@quixotic.ca.

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You can access several years of archived columns at <http://edges.Canadahomepage.net>.

I write a second column each Wednesday, called Soft Edges, which deals somewhat more gently with issues of life and faith. To sign up for Soft Edges, write to me directly, at the address above, or send a note to softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca

PROMOTION STUFF...

If you know someone else who might like to receive this column regularly via e-mail, send a request to jimt@quixotic.ca. Or, if you wish, forward them a copy of this column. But please put your name on it, so they don't think I'm sending out spam.

For other sources worth pursuing, try

- Ralph Milton's HymnSight webpage, <http://www.hymnsight.ca>, with a vast gallery of photos you can use to enhance the appearance of the visual images you project for liturgical use (prayers, responses, hymn verses, etc.)
- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, www.seemslkegod.org;
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap" -- reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, www.traditionaliconoclast.com
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write alvawood@gmail.com to get onto her mailing list.
