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Recommended Citation

Right Reverend Monsignor William T. Dillon (2016) "Censorship in Education," *The Catholic Lawyer*: Vol. 3 : No. 4 , Article 7.
Available at: <https://scholarship.law.stjohns.edu/tcl/vol3/iss4/7>

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CENSORSHIP IN EDUCATION

RIGHT REVEREND MONSIGNOR WILLIAM T. DILLON*

THOSE WHO ARE acquainted with Sir Henry Maine's treatise on Roman Law may remember that he initiated it thus; "Roman Law began as it ended with a code." He was referring, of course, to the Twelve Tables and the Code of Justinian. He was a master of epigram but one turns a neat phrase too often at the expense of truth and almost always of precision.

Conscious of this danger I am nonetheless sorely tempted, not for the sake of being epigrammatic but in order to highlight my conviction and contention, to indulge in this very temerarious procedure.

Since my assigned subject is "Censorship in Education" I find myself writing education is censorship. Naturally I ask myself "Can I reverse that judgment and say censorship is education?"

May I at once clarify. I do not mean to assert for a moment that education and censorship are synonyms. What I do mean is that there could be no true education if there were no educational censorship. What is more – educational censorship is an inextricable part of all education. There is an academic differentiation between these two thoughts. For our purposes they may be considered identical. Thus rendered our epigram will stand.

Here we have been talking of something that we have not yet defined. Every professor in Scholastic philosophy I have had will rise up "out of the depths" to shame and confound me. I was taught a "better way." I was cautioned to state my thesis precisely, to define my terms accurately, and to draw my conclusions syllogistically. Alas, I am deeply conscious of this need but if we could succeed in effecting an agreement

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in terms we would almost certainly obviate the need of this paper and of this issue of *THE CATHOLIC LAWYER*. While it will be one of my objectives to achieve just that harmony, I have not too much hope of its



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accomplishment partly because too many men are not formal philosophers and partly because they vary so violently in their metaphysical principles and axioms.

Perhaps it would be well to note here too that because of this dread dissidence it is vastly unlikely that anyone will change his opinion by reason of what may be written. That is not too important. If by happy chance some one may ponder ever so little and question, if only a mite, it will be return enough. Men, even men of good will, are not too often stirred by logic nor convinced by naked truth.

Returning to the concept of educational censorship I find that men are as varied and divided in their notion of the term as are the antipodes. Oddly enough east and west meet here as no other where in all the world because the extremists allow no deviation. Those who insist upon their standards do not permit a scrawny iota of change. Those who are opposed to all criticism are just as intolerant. It is not that they are contending that truth allows no compromise. Each is his own standard. This is the head and fount of the impasse.

I cherish a personal antipathy against those who use lexical definitions as their point of emergence in a problem like this.

Maybe this is because I have found these definitions so vacuous. Maybe it is because I have discovered as have you that when you begin with one definition it opens the way to a score of others, each basically unsatisfactory — too often — and what starts as an unknown terminates in a geometrical progression of the said unknown with confusion as the ultimate. Maybe, finally, it is because years of teaching have taught me one thing if no other — *viz.* — that definitions in general rarely truly define.

Confronted by this problem I must needs nonetheless present a workable and working concept of censorship in the area of education. In this despair I consulted the *New Britannica* dictionary to see if I might glean some light and found censorship described as the office, term, power of or act of a censor or critic. I might add of course that a censor was defined as a critic. I shall have occasion to return to the secondary and derivative meanings later in our discussion.

I should like to add that I chose the *New Britannica* because it was of so recent production. In spite of that it showed little influence of modern propaganda.

Webster's *Collegiate* (1952 edition) contributes nothing to the old "unabridged" which only added an historical reference to the *Britannica*.

If the critics of educational censorship, which I have generally defined as criticism, would but remember its elemental significance there would be less of acrimony and even of conflict. It is in large measure because they refuse to others what they assume as a consitutional right, indeed as a divine heritage, that they run amuck.

I might add a clarification at this point: censorship, as a term, has sometimes been used in connection with the deletion of

pertinent material for strategic reasons, such as military secrecy. I strongly believe that deletion of pertinent material has no place in education. Deletion, therefore, has no place in the definition of educational censorship, which I advance. The selectivity of materials, however, is a proper consideration for the educator since selection is distinguishable from deletion. About this I shall have more to say later.

I have taken a long time to set the scene but this is much more than prologue. It is the very core of the entire issue. There is bound to be a direct ratio between the acceptance of terms and our ultimate conclusions.

We are presently involved in this whole melancholic mess because either we have done violence to the meaning of words or we have permitted our wish to father our thoughts and that is an unfortunate paternity in most situations.

I have already made mention of derivative meanings of censorship. One of them is a psychological or better a psychoanalytic concept and has very little importance here. Oddly enough, in the Britannica (and not in the Webster or the Oxford dictionary), we read as the last rendition; "Censorship of Books — The authority confided to a Roman Catholic group to examine and condemn books against faith or morals." Then in brackets is added the notation "(See Index)." It would seem to me that just here there appears to be a joinder of issue. Note that I say "appears" to be because I do not subscribe to the fitness of that reference. In any case it presents us with the apparent conflict. We do not have to carry the ball from this point but we gladly do so.

For purposes of clarity I must emphasize that my topic is not censorship of

books nor censorship in general but its place in education. Since my contact as teacher has been chiefly with and in Catholic education I speak from that angle. I might add however that what I say from this seemingly myopic viewpoint should be verified in whatever system and by whatever shore.

I am assured that censorship will be considered in this issue of THE CATHOLIC LAWYER as a constitutional matter and from other approaches. I submit that fundamentally it is not a constitutional question except in so far as the Constitution may point a sanction. I am not going to here revive what may have become to some of you a much overworked theme — the natural law. I believe that it is justifiable but I would prefer a different avenue of initiation and pursuit.

It will serve no purpose for me to propagandize for what I believe education to be. Here again men differ radically nor have I any desire to impose my convictions on others. I believe in spite of this that there are some things upon which we can agree.

Differing in philosophical concepts and theological tenets — at odds even as to moral values — varying in our standards of truth — there still remain certain pragmatic criteria about which there can be little question or discord. Only a fool ambitions by education to make an economically successful man as his sole objective. Only the villain would produce other than the good man and the happy one. I am of course aware that goodness and happiness can be considered relative terms but in my book this is achieved only by violating facts.

It is not my design to run the entire gamut of educational objectives here. That is another and vastly different project. I am presently interested only in the func-

tion of censorship in pedagogy. I submit that if and when you take away from the area of growth the element of decent criticism you have left only a vacuum. I contend that the educator who does not criticise and censor when it becomes necessary is a complete nonentity and a dramatic waste. This is the tragic progeny of what we have called euphoniously "progressive education."

Please do not misunderstand or misinterpret. I know somewhat of the virtue of the plan. I am in complete accord with many of its ideals. I know the evils that it made essay to overcome and I reprobate them as enthusiastically as anyone. I am sure that the future must write to its credit all its ultimate values but we are already riding the trough of its despairs. We have lamented its horrible fruits of undiscipline and of license. We have already turned our backs upon too many of its monster offsprings and we shall come full circle in the day of our greater wisdom and better nature.

I am not contending as you will observe that our system was pure gold. I do not assert that we have not been over-conservative at times. I am palpably disturbed because a few were able to stigmatise the many. There was room for indictment of many of our self-constituted authorities. I grow wrathful even now as I read their effusions and their name is legion to this hour.

I have said earlier that the choice of materials by an educator for use in the educational process requires a certain degree of selectivity. A scientific program will require a certain emphasis on mathematics and physics, whereas the arts scholar will devote his main concentration to the purely cultural subjects. Selectivity is also properly

employed in connection with material, pertinent in itself for course content. Some classical works are examined *en toto* pursuant to a critical approach, while in connection with others the examination is confined to excerpts selected from them which are not offensive to morals and faith. The justification for the excerptive process in this connection lies in the fact that the truth contained in the passages omitted or pretermitted can be learned from other passages where it is not so involuted with evil or error that the task of extracting it by criticism would consume the time required for the achievement of the course objectives. The abuse of this aspect of selectivity, however, lies in the improper or arbitrary editing of material.

The fact that there are some allowed to continue in this abuse is evidence of the freedom granted by the much maligned "authority." It is proof also of the magnificent tolerance which has characterized our system despite all the calumnies to the contrary.

I said too that I was not here concerned with the *Index*. I find it hard to believe that this is the pattern for modern censorship. The present practice is to attack things in their very incipency which looks like a pretty smart method. The *Index*, in most cases, has not operated until the author has achieved a degree of notoriety. The cumulative list of the years is most unimpressive in magnitude, where as the book-burners of modernity go in for mass accomplishment. I recognize of course that the output of literary garbage is much greater today than it was in other times.

Without endeavoring to defend the *Index* since that is not my subject (nor my right), I would at least note that if it is the business of the litterateur to point the errors

aesthetically of a volume, if it is his right to counsel against the tomes and writers that will vitiate the style of the unskilled and the novice, I can not understand the shocked amazement and the unpleasant vituperation because a world teacher in the person of the Church protects the still unskilled from the dangerous results of the most unfortunate attack upon the beautiful that man can engineer.

It may seem that I have gone far afield but I believe that since education is a synchrony, at best, no element is foreign. I feel too that most of the loose thinking has been in these fringe areas and their discussion is germane accordingly.

I began with the thesis that education was made effective largely through censorship. I submit that for your determination for it is you who are the last appellate court — not some doctrinaire who seeks by fanciful figmentation to tell you what are your own thought processes.

You know, whatever the level of learning that you have attained, that it is the end product of a teacher's criticism (not exclusively of course). You know that you learn very little by being right, that the road to erudition is by failure and error which some discerning and kindly teacher criticised. This is as normal as breathing or growth. The professor who failed to censor your mistakes would be the foulest traitor. The master, who allowed you from whatever motive to go down the road to fallacy without monition, is unfit to live.

It is true that we have three avenues to learning and that two of them are so to speak egoistic or ego-centered — namely — experimentation and deduction but it is not less true that most of what we know we have on the trust that we repose in others and that this is the earliest method

(I make allowance of course for random and reflex actions as media of growth).

Not only is it primal but it bulks by far the largest single avenue to scholarship. It is again a phase of censorship — call it what you may. I would be remiss if I failed to point out too that even in the two media that I have called ego-centered we must needs develop criteria by means of the aid of others. Without it we would err abysmally.

It might be opportune at this point to answer a question which must be burgeoning — *viz.* — if educational censorship (or criticism) coupled with selectivity which is its product is so integral a part of learning why the great rebellion against it in this wild hour? I don't believe that it is part of my assignment to answer that nor do I consider it within my competence. I have some notions that may be indicative. I propound them as such alone.

I think that there is an atmosphere of unrest. This is fairly evident. (The result is a rebellion against whatever was.) It is manifest in philosophy, in economics, in literature and in social relations. Of course it is appalling in affairs international. We marvel at the deliberate duplicity of a Molotov. We are shocked by the utter disregard for truth of a Gromyko but in our own theorizations we set the scene for a new race of just such moral degenerates and we justify it even as do they.

Historically, we are the inheritors (I speak broadly) of a new freedom and of course we do not know its metes and bounds. I have no doubt but that man is good and that in some better day he will have learned by defeat and possibly by catastrophe but the world had lived so long in moral helotry (call it what you will) that it cannot face the white sunlight of

freedom and there read the moderation that is virtue.

To complicate things there are always propagandists and men with a cause. It is well that this is so but they are almost inevitably extremists whether on the side of evil or the angels.

I am not impugning motives. I am not suspecting that these doctrinaires are vicious. This is not my right. The facts are eloquent and they point to men who know not liberty but unmitigated license. They fail to recognise that there can never be freedom until there has been a law to make choice possible. They do not see that until a man has some restraint upon him he is a robot, a whim of necessity and plaything of blind destiny. The finality of choice and the test of freedom is the ability a man has to go to hell.

Some one may here allege that I am bypassing the real issue and that what they resent is censorship sanctioned by law. I have already pointed out that I am not here writing as a legist. I am not overmuch concerned about that phase of things at this time. I would like to emphasize however that all censorship has a sanction or it fails in its own concept. What is more we ought to recognise that every law (worthy of the name) ever written was and is a form of censorship and invariably has a sanction. I am not thinking either of the penal code alone. The law of negotiable instruments, the various statutory provisions concerning corporations or any statute you may name can eventually be rendered in terms of censorship.

The poor "Bill of Rights," second thought of constitution writers, has been called upon to justify more objectionable practices than all the Caesars ever con-

trived. I am perfectly conscious of the good it has achieved but I am disturbed that it has become the cloak of scoundrels which they wear too often as if it were the mantle of sanctity.

In another day we did not need such devious and questionable media to justify our conduct before men because we lived by a norm of discipline. We cherished the gift of freedom. We admitted honestly when we had abused it and did not seek by rationalization to make light of fog, day of darkness and truth of error.

When men resent certain censorships because they violate their constitutional rights they may well be telling the truth in America of today as in Hitleristic Germany, Mussolinian Italy or Stalinistic Russia. These are *hic et nunc* propositions.

When they deny all right to censorship they are negating all growth and they are steeled to impenitent nihilism. They are destroying all norms and deleting all possibility of ever arriving at truth. All this to have a freedom which is anarchy, a liberty that is perdition, a democracy that is a travesty.

Personally I don't like any part of legal censorship as it is castigated by its critics. I dislike it because it is so subjective. I dislike it because it is too often the pretty stupid remedy of "do-good" busy-bodies. I dislike it because it is frequently the child of bigotry, because it is narrow and intolerant, and because it opens the avenue to ever wider and more intolerable abuses but that is personal and because I do cherish our American freedom. I am ready to concede that I may be very wrong in this approach. Whatever the evil, I do not believe that the remedy is total destruction, that the only escape is complete annihila-

tion of the very element that is constitutive of all culture, parcel of all education and integer of all growth.

Limit legal censorship. Of course. Destroy it. At your peril.

It would seem to me that implicit in what has been written here is the germinal and basic concept that was explicitly enunciated at the outset. I said there that it was not peculiar to any specific school of education.

If I may I should like to address myself to the matter of our Catholic system. I am prepared for the objection that I am a product of this plan and unable accordingly to judge it without bias. That is not true since I have spent most of my student days in a non-Catholic milieu. I am ready to accept the challenge that I am blind to our failings. I almost wish I were at times. I would have lived a much happier academic life for nigh to two generations in this atmosphere. I am sure that some will say that I am coerced by fear or I know not what other motive. This is as unfair as it is unfounded.

I can without reservation or qualification say that in thirty-five years as a teacher in a Catholic college, during more than thirty of which I was also its chief administrator, I never once felt nor inflicted the sting of arbitrary or unreasonable censorship. I never once felt constricted by anything but truth itself.

As a student I did experience the influence of narrowness and bigotry but that was not limited to Catholic institutions. Indeed I have heard more academic unkindness in seemingly completely non-partisan fields than ever I did in the necessarily authoritative teachings even of theology.

Which censorship is more objectionable? I would much prefer even the law that

imposes fine or imprisonment to the barbed harassing of high-minded, if naive, adolescents by a man who uses his lofty place as teacher to destroy the last bastions of decency where they stand in souls of innocence and fineness. I shall never be able to understand the mentality whether it be found in pedagogue or mock artist that insists that it must be allowed to do exactly as it wills without any restrictions. This is the jungle — no more, no less.

At the expense of seeming to become an unsophisticate, I still believe that discipline is as necessary to life as the sun or the pull of the tides or food. If you can produce that desideratum without the aid of criticism in some one of its forms I have not seen it. If you can make that criticism stick without some final sanction I should like to know the method.

I recognise that we may differ in our concept of what is right and wrong. I shall not enter into the reasons for this imbroglio but unless you are ready to say that there is nor right nor wrong you are at an impasse when you destroy all censorship because in so doing you have also destroyed the medium by which good or truth may be achieved.

I did see misguided censorship in some Catholic colleges and I saw it on the broad reaches of Catholic education on every plateau but this was not the product of the Church or of its teachings. It was the spawn of meagre minds. I would hesitate to call them mean.

I have insisted that there are zealots in whatever school. I have met my share in ours. For the record be it said that while they used the Church and its canons to establish their point the rest of us always knew that they were their own deities su-

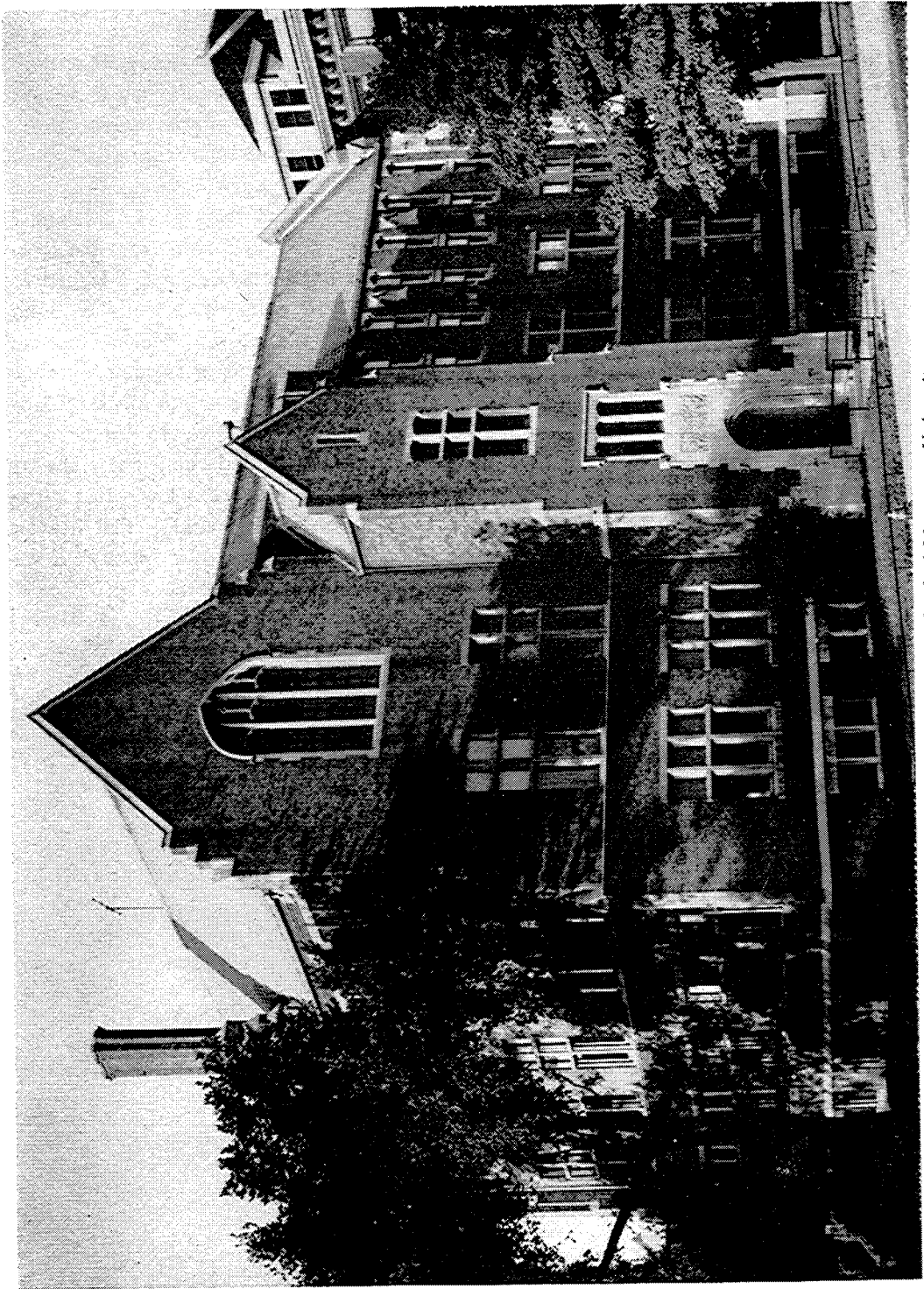
perior to papal or divine authority. This has been our bane and probably will be in the days to be. It is not a religious malady. It is a personal affliction.

It is not my assignment, as I have noted, to probe the roots or the remedies but only to offer a survey. I trust I am not out of character in suggesting that if we are today as lawless as some would think (and I do not subscribe to the contention), it is in some degree the result of a fatal mental alchemy that in its search for the gold of freedom has effected the dross of moral slavery. There has been too much of over-voluble insistence upon freedom without the consciousness of its price. There is no freedom until men have learned to live by law. Byron tells of a day when "men and angels walked side by side and gave evil no supremacy." Should that day return we

may write finis to the thing that all of us alike resent — stricture.

My will resents a thousand limitations but my intelligence tells me that they must be. My heart cries out for freedom but my mind tells me that silence is more eloquent.

Through all the years of my teaching I sought to free my students from the limitations of ignorance and evil. I longed to give them every liberty. I could wish no less for every man who walks — that he would breathe the air of freedom untrammelled but I have learned, as much by failure as by success, that we are straitened by truth — that even God could not make us free unless He gave us a law — that "free love is freest when bound" — that heaven is our destiny but hell our "luxury" if we choose it.



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