

The Cowardice of Censorship



by Theodore Dalrymple

The main threat of censorship comes nowadays not from governments, but from an alliance, or at least a synergy, of pressure groups and unscrupulous and pusillanimous corporations.

A handsomely produced magazine, *The European Conservative*, for which I occasionally write a literary essay, was once displayed on the racks of the largest distributor of magazines in Great Britain, W.H. Smith, which has now withdrawn it from the racks, and refused to sell it in the future. It was intimidated into doing so by two homosexuals who objected to a cartoon in its current issue.

In the cartoon, a mother is shown asking her young son how school was today. The boy vomits: and his vomitus is depicted as a rainbow, the symbol of what we are now supposed to call the 'homosexual community' (a community being a population of people who share any characteristic whatsoever).

Now it is perfectly obvious to anyone but those utterly

determined to take offence in order to magnify their own importance or establish their moral purity in the eyes of others that what is being commented on, criticised, or satirised in the cartoon is not the phenomenon of homosexuality, but the indoctrination of young children into an ideology about things which they are ill-equipped to take an interest in, let alone understand. Any ideology is boring to young children, except perhaps for the very few natural Berias and Dzerzhinskies among them, and modern sexual ideologies are more boring than most, their militancy often being inversely proportional to their intellectual content.

It ought not to be supposed that the cartoon was aiming at a straw man, far from it. In Birmingham, England, for example, militant teachers attempted to indoctrinate children as young as six, predominantly from Muslim homes, with the glories of transgenderism, and thereby achieved a kind of miracle: they caused the rest of the population to sympathise with a crowd of protesting Muslim women dressed in black. I suppose this was a service of a kind.

Self-evidently the cartoon in *The European Conservative* did not preach hatred, much less did it incite to crime. It was not directed at homosexuals but at the enforced teaching of an ideology. It was well within the moral confines or limits of free speech; it was not even tasteless, though from the complainants' point of view it had the horrible quality of being quite funny and pointing to an uncomfortable truth. Everyone to whom I showed it laughed, and no one likes his pieties to be laughed at or mocked in this way.

What is striking and significant about this sorry story is that it took only two complainants, allegedly and self-appointedly speaking on behalf of a large number of similarly outraged people, or potentially outraged people, to affect the conduct of a large corporation (admittedly so clear a decline that it amounts almost to free-fall, and which is therefore fearful for its survival). The corporation caved immediately,

fearing boycotts and bad publicity that the complainants might, and probably would, have organised.

This is a fine example of the asymmetrical war being waged on freedom of expression by censorious (and censoring) moral enthusiasts. The war is asymmetrical because the latter-day Savonarolas, who often manage to be puritanical and licentious at the same time, are determined and monomaniac, whereas their opponents are dispersed and interested in many things. Although Hume warned long ago, in his essay on the freedom of the press, that it is seldom that liberty is lost all at once, none of those on the side of liberty is prepared to fight very hard any individual case of suppression, principally because he risks thereby becoming a kind of mirror-image monomaniac, but also, increasingly, for his job. As I have intimated, the normal person cares about many things, not just one; he is therefore at a perpetual disadvantage against fanatics.

In this case, for example, the people who disagree strongly with W H Smith's decision are unlikely to lobby very hard for the company to rescind it, nor are they likely to arrange a commercially damaging boycott. Of course, the company is free to sell what it wants: it is under no legal or even moral obligation to sell *The European Conservative* or to stock any or every publication. Nevertheless, the decision was extremely pusillanimous, and the company must have been aware that the two complainants wanted to suppress the publication altogether if they could. Following of Henry Ford, the complainants' motto was, 'You can have any opinion you like, so long as it is ours.'

It is not as if the complainants had no other resort open to them than attempted suppression. They had, and have, every right (which is not the same as saying that they have every *reason*) to complain to the editors; they have a wider choice than ever before of media in which they might complain about the cartoon and explain why they think it is so wrong. They have many styles from which to choose, from the satiric

and commonly abusive screed to the impenetrability and pseudo-profundity of contemporary literary scholarship. *The European Conservative* would not stop them or try to gag them.

Citizens of free countries have not only a right to be outraged, but a duty to keep their outrage within bounds. There are certain newspapers which outrage me every time I read them, for example, but it never occurs to me that I should lobby for their suppression. The problem is that where opinion is the whole of virtue, public expression of outrage is a sign of exceptional virtue—as well as being the principal joy of fanatics. Freedom cannot long survive perpetual, chronic, and largely bogus outrage.

Freedom is not merely a matter of legal or constitutional arrangements, but a habit of the heart. No constitution or law could make any difference to W H Smith's cowardice, or to the complainants' effective moral blackmail. The habit of the heart requires a discipline, that of limiting one's own emotions. No one believes in freedom who does not accord it to the other man, as people, especially campaigners in identity politics, are less and less inclined or willing to do.

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