

DANIEL F. SULLIVAN

Milton's *Areopagitica* & Freedom of Speech on Campus

A FEW YEARS AGO, at a seminar meant to help college presidents ground their thinking about the issues they face as campus leaders in some of the best insights of classic texts, I read for the first time John Milton's *Areopagitica: A speech for the liberty of unlicensed printing to the parliament of England* (1985). Originally published in 1644, *Areopagitica* makes a powerful—and precocious—argument for freedom of speech and against censorship in publishing. After twenty years as a college president, having experienced and observed many calls to censor, I've come to believe that there is not much to know on the topic beyond what Milton wrote over 350 years ago.

Areopagitica was published in response “to Parliament’s ordinance for licensing the press of June 14, 1643.” The effect of the ordinance against which Milton wrote “was to give Archbishop Laud, who was also Chancellor of the University of Oxford, actual control over every press in England, with power to stop publication of any book ‘contrary to . . . the Doctrine and Discipline of the Church of England.’” This was *deeply* disturbing to Milton, who wrote, “as good almost kill a man as kill a good book: [he] who kills a man kills a reasonable creature, God’s image; but he who destroys a good book, kills reason itself, kills the image of God, as it were, in the eye” (720).

Areopagitica becomes more libertarian as it progresses. In the early pages, Milton distinguishes scandalous, seditious, libelous, blasphemous, and atheistical writing—which he says everyone would, of course, be willing to suppress, even in advance of publication—from everything else, which should be completely free from constraint. By the end, however, Milton suggests that even these distinctions might not be tenable. There he says, “Give me the liberty to know, to utter, and to argue freely according to conscience, above all liberties” (746).

Milton explains why censorship is so antithetical to a free and democratic society in a fourfold argument. First, he says, where there has been censorship there has also been extreme political repression. Censorship is associated with the most despicable of societies. Surely Parliament would not want people elsewhere in the world to see England in that light. If a book proves to be bad, in the opinion of educated critics, it can be ignored. Or, in a society with freedom to publish, it can be attacked. Many responses other than censorship are available.

DANIEL F. SULLIVAN is president of St. Lawrence University.

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St. Lawrence University

St. Lawrence
University



Second, according to Milton, the reading of literally anything has some basic, beneficial effects, even the reading of error and untruth. Exposure to error leads to greater understanding of how to locate the truth (727). (Milton doesn't say, of course, how much error and untruth you have to read to gain the beneficial effects he describes.)

Third, Milton argues that prior restraint is not a practical method for achieving the goals of the censors. Banning a book is counterproductive because it will ensure that it is read. Further, how will one find good censors in a society that has censored its literature if knowing how to distinguish truth from falsity is learned only from having read both? How will potential censors get any practice? In addition, what about all the books that have already been published? And why just books? What about theater, dance, and normal conversation? To

cancel all of these modes of expression would require a massive governmental or church apparatus that would tie up huge resources that could be put to better uses. Here Milton has a scary vision of one of the most important features of the modern totalitarian state; it is one of the best examples of the precocity of *Areopagitica*.

Finally, Milton argues that licensing the publishers will have a chilling effect on truth-seeking and knowledge creation, much to the detriment of England, particularly in its attempt to remain economically competitive with the rest of Europe. For knowledge leads to the development of technology, and technology leads to the creation of new products and more efficient means of producing old products. I was stunned to read Milton on this point; he might just as well have been writing in a modern business magazine or the *Wall Street Journal*.

Because he believed England to be innately superior to other countries in these matters, Milton thought censorship would hurt England above all other countries:

Lords and Commons of England, consider what nation it is whereof ye are, and whereof ye are the governors; a nation not slow an dull, but of a quick, ingenious and piercing spirit, acute to invent, subtle and sinewy to discourse, not beneath the reach of any point the highest that human capacity can soar to. (742)

For Milton, the pursuit of knowledge is inherently messy; there will of necessity be much conflict of opinion; therefore, tolerance of the views of others is critical. Intellectual conflict within a society is a sign of health. Out of difference comes a larger coherence, a better whole. He says it beautifully, I think: “Where there is much desire to learn, there of necessity will be much arguing, much writing, many opinions; for opinion in good men is but knowledge in the making” (743).

What to do

Our pursuit of knowledge in higher education is frequently messy, but the best colleges and universities have about them a kind of intellectual scratchiness. I’m not sure exactly what the right scratchiness coefficient is for a university, but I do know that it’s greater than zero and that great universities, especially, must allow very wide latitude for their students, faculty, and staff to express themselves freely.

But the freedom to speak and the freedom to publish carry with them great responsibilities. Sometimes people misuse these freedoms and offend deeply the spirit of a learning community, or its members individually. But Milton convinces us, I believe, that in a free society, absent a clear and present danger, the response to such offense by church, state, college, or individual should not—indeed, cannot—be prior restraint or the imposition of a general program of censorship. The corrosive effects of censorship, Milton argues, outweigh any conceivable positive benefits.

On the other hand, out of fear of being accused of intolerance, we must not let our special sensitivity to the issue of free speech keep us from challenging truly offensive speech. Individuals must use the freedom to speak and publish to confront those who misuse it. Our freedoms to speak and publish are protected,

but we are not insulated from the consequences of what we say. Only by having the courage to speak out can we ensure that those who speak and write offensively—as each of us defines that—are not insulated from the consequences of what they say. This is not always easy to do, but we must have the courage to do it.

At the same time, we must find ways to say what we need to say with civility. In response to urging by a colleague, a faculty member asked how we should define civility. The colleague proposed this simple rule: “Civility is challenging *ideas* as strenuously as you wish, while refraining from attacking people (as individuals or groups).” Our students should leave college more skilled at civility than they were when they came.

I do not believe that students coming to college today are less civil than they were a generation ago, but there is much greater diversity on our campuses now, so our discourses will challenge students, and be challenged by them, in new ways. There are voices at the table today—a very good thing—that were absent a generation ago. They do not share all of the presuppositions of our historic majority populations. When it is presuppositions that differ, civil discourse is much tougher. We have to pay more systematic attention to modeling civil discourse ourselves for our students, teaching good listening skills, and helping students see that the essence of liberal education is openness to the possibility of changing one’s mind based on the good arguments or new data one encounters. Though it happens too rarely, I am always heartened when I hear someone say, “Gee, I never thought of it that way before.”

Good discourse does not, of course, pretend that conflicting views do not exist. Rather, as Milton said so well, “opinion in good men [and women] is but knowledge in the making” (743). □

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REFERENCE

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