

“Give me liberty to know, to utter, and to argue freely according to conscience,
above all liberties.”

– John Milton, *Areopagitica*¹

Liberty. It is something we take for granted in America. Freedom of the press, especially. What censorship exists in our country, most are not aware. In the seventeenth century, John Milton was deeply concerned with civil and religious liberty. Of particular concern was freedom of the press, for – though prior to the revolution some, including Milton, were able to evade the licensers and get published – Milton had high hopes for the advancement of liberty under the new Parliament. The cause of liberty was delivered a setback when the new Parliament passed a bill that provided for the licensing of the press. In *Areopagitica*, Milton appealed to the new regime to reconsider its decision and free England’s press from its restraints. At root, Milton’s defense of a free press has its basis in human nature: God-given free will, fallibility, reason – thus necessitating freedom of conscience in order that we might seek Truth, that we might learn and cleave to virtue.

Milton begins the *Areopagitica* on a decidedly realistic note: “...this whole Discourse propos’d will be a certain testimony, if not a Trophy. For this is not the liberty which wee can hope, that no grievance ever should arise in the Commonwealth, that let no man in this World expect; but when complaints are freely heard, deeply consider’d, and speedily reform’d, then is the utmost bound of civill liberty attain’d, that wise men

¹ John Milton, *Areopagitica and Other Political Writings of John Milton*, (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, Inc., 1999), p. 44.

looke for.”² It is not expected that all will agree. Indeed, Milton makes a case for continual debate and reformation with a poetic analogy of Truth to the Egyptian god Osiris. The lovely form of the virgin Truth, after her divine Master had ascended and the Apostles departed, was hewn into a thousand pieces and scattered to the four winds. “From that time ever since, the sad friends of Truth, such as durst appear, imitating the careful search that *Isis* made for the mangl’d body of *Osiris*, went up and down gathering up limb by limb still as they could find them. We have not yet found them all[.]”³ The light of reason, and the knowledge we have thus far gained by it, is not meant to be stared at as if at the sun but rather by it knowledge more remote to us may be illumined. Thus Milton argues “Suffer not these licencing prohibitions to stand at every place of opportunity forbidding and disturbing them that continue seeking, that continue to do our obsequies to the torn body of our martyr’d Saint.”⁴

It is not the dissenters or the innovators who destroy the unity of society. Rather,

There be who perpetually complain of schisms and sects, and make it such a calamity that any man dissents from their maxims. ’Tis their own pride and ignorance which causes the disturbing, who neither will hear with meekness, nor can convince, yet all must be suppress which is not found in their *Syntagma* [systematic treatise]. They are the troublers, they are the dividers of unity, who neglect and permit not others to unite those dissever’d peeces which are yet wanting to the body of Truth.⁵

Human beings are not omniscient or infallible; given the limits of the human mind and the incompleteness of our knowledge, free competition in ideas is the best means of getting at Truth. It is in this way that mistaken ideas can best be identified, refuted, and displaced.

² Ibid., p. 4.

³ Ibid., p. 38.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., p. 39.

One might counter that a free press and a consequent free competition in ideas will lead to a ‘race to the bottom’ so to speak, that many erroneous and evil doctrines will thus be propagated. Truth would surely be choked out by the weeds, and virtue would soon follow its demise. Yet Milton has pointed rejoinders for this (at least partially) mistaken notion. He argues that Truth will carry the field in the end. “Let her and Falshood grapple; who ever knew Truth put to the wors, in a free and open encounter. Her confuting is the best and surest suppressing.”⁶

It might be argued that falsehoods can more easily ensnare the minds of the masses, but

if it come to prohibiting, there is not ought more likely to be prohibited than truth it self; whose first appearance to our eyes blear’d and dimm’d with prejudice and custom, is more unsightly and unplaussible then many errors...And what doe they tell us vainly of new opinions, when this very opinion of theirs, that none must be heard, but whom they like, is the worst and newest opinion of all others; and is the chief cause why sects and schisms doe so much abound, and true knowledge is kept at distance from us; besides yet a greater danger is in it.⁷

Conversely, “instead of suppressing sects and schisms, [prohibition] raises them and invests them with a reputation: *The punishing of wits enhances their authority*, saith the Vicount St. Albans, and a *forbidd’n writing is thought to be a certain spark of truth that flies up in the faces of them who seeke to tread it out.*”⁸

More to the point, the greater danger alluded to above lies in the course of a general reformation. When God shakes up a kingdom “with strong and healthfull commotions,”⁹ it is true that “many sectaries and false preachers”¹⁰ come out of the

⁶ Ibid., p. 45; see also the top of p. 46.

⁷ Ibid., p. 48.

⁸ Ibid., p. 34.

⁹ Ibid., p. 48.

¹⁰ Ibid.

woodwork, but so too do God's own come forth. Not only do they revise what had been taught before but they also go further and make "some new steps in the discovery of truth."¹¹ Licensing of the press, prohibiting ideas diverging from those of the establishment, run the great risk of not only fueling the fire of falsehood but of suppressing the good work of God's own reformers.

Moving to a more personal and individual level, Milton argues that the knowledge contained in a corrupt book will not defile the conscience of the pure, for "To the pure all things are pure."¹² Whereas even the best books are to a "naughty mind...not unapplicable to occasions of evill."¹³ Bad books, on the other hand serve a "discreet and judicious Reader...in many respects to discover, to confute, to forewarn, and to illustrate."¹⁴

We come now to Milton's central argument for freedom of conscience. Mature, adult men (and women) must learn the great virtue of temperance, but they can only do so by the light of their own reason and through hard-earned experience. This task God has given to every man and woman, by giving them free will; they must be free to choose, to make mistakes and to learn from them.¹⁵ Without the possibility of vice there can be no virtue, or at least virtue would be a pale and pathetic thing: impure. We are purified by trial, i.e., confronting that which is contrary to the good and/or to what we know (or think we know).¹⁶ It is for this reason that we must be free to exercise our own conscience. And it is the need for freedom of conscience, founded in human nature, that is at the root of the preceding arguments (and others made by Milton besides).

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., p. 15.

¹³ Ibid., p. 16.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 17-18.

If it is still thought that the great mass of men needs be protected from bad books, it must be remarked that

all human learning and controversie in religious points must remove out of the world, yea the Bible it selfe; for that oftimes relates blasphemy not nicely, it describes the carnall sense of wicked men not unelegantly, it brings in holiest men passionately murmuring against providence through all the arguments of *Epicurus*: in other great disputes it answers dubiously and darkly to the common reader.¹⁷

Further, all sources of vice would have to be guarded against,¹⁸ the impossibility, indeed, the counterproductiveness, of which, Milton fully recognizes. Invariably, the effect of prohibiting vice would be no different in essentials than the criminalizing of alcohol during the American Prohibition; a fiasco which created more and worse crime, and helped foster the big crime families of the twentieth century.

John Milton's defense of a free press has broader implications, rooted as it is in a defense of freedom of conscience. He brings together a vast array of arguments – metaphysical, epistemological, ethical, and practical – all showing that not only will licensing the press *not* protect us from vice, rather the opposite, but it will inhibit a continual reformation and movement towards a greater understanding of God's Truth. In sum, "If every action which is good, or evill in man at ripe years, were to be under pittance, and prescription, and compulsion, what were vertue but a name, what praise could be then due to well-doing, what grammercy to be sober, just or continent?"¹⁹ And in the end, is it not more Christian to show tolerance towards those with different ideas, though they may be mistaken, so that we might be united in the search for truth?²⁰

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 18.

¹⁸ A consistency argument: "If we think to regulate Printing, thereby to rectifie manners, we must regulat all recreations and pastimes, all that is delightful to man" (p. 22).

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 23.

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 41 & 45.