

Librarians, freedom and democracy

was most interested in the content of the LAA NQ Regional Group Special Newsletter, July, 1986.

I cut out the article from *The Australian* and mulled over it for few days. However, I did nothing about it specifically. As someone who is involved in various areas of peace and justice (in fact I was recently involved in a small campaign in Townsville regarding economic sanctions against South Africa), I would like to comment, and put a point of view and hopefully open some debate on this whole contentious issue.

The section of the LAA Statement on Freedom to Read which seems to me to be the key, lies in the first paragraph. . . . The LAA 'believing that freedom can be protected in a democratic society only if its citizens have access to information' . . . etc. The crucial words 'DEMOCRATIC'. In this instance South Africa is certainly not a democratic country.

Basic human rights and freedoms do not exist for the majority . . .

Basic human rights and freedoms do not exist for the majority of her citizens. As far as I am aware, the LAA's statement was written for Australians by Australians, recognising that his country is still a democracy.

As someone who believes strongly in the right of all human beings to live in free just societies, knowingly supplying an oppressor with the means to further that oppression is surely immoral. Is the LAA statement asking its members to compromise themselves? If the International Community appeals for sanctions and embargoes on a nation for breach of human rights; if the U.N. Charter has been violated, are librarians being asked to pull against these appeals and world opinion? If so, by what authority?

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Librarians are the custodians and dispensers of the wealth of the world's information. Information is the product of many minds, many backgrounds. In many respects it is not a dead abstract commodity, but the fruit of many years of labour and industry. It is bequeathed in the main for the greater good of humanity. May I suggest that 'free' dispensation may not always be the right moral courses? This naturally brings in the whole argument of when to encourage bans, who would be spokesperson for those employed in establishments which may not hold the same views. Librarians, like every other profession, are a motley selection of people with differing views, political and religious beliefs. Fortunately in a democracy, this can be so and is encouraged. I suggest that the library profession has not given enough thought to these issues and that blanket statements are not helpful but may well show a lack of moral courage.

The Oppenheimers and Nobels of this world had doubts about the real worth of their discoveries and agonised over the long term effects of their work. The Bonhoeffers

and Romeros of the world, in speaking out against oppressive regimes, used their skills, professional abilities and moral courage in their fight. Do librarians rank higher in moral and professional standing than such as they? Surely as human beings we are being asked first and foremost to be responsible members of the world community. If our professional statements are a block in this, then I would suggest there is something wrong with our statements and, or our interpretation of them.

This argument/discussion is, I feel just part of wider matter which may well be opportune to raise here. Librarianship, rightly, or wrongly, has been known as a fairly cloistered profession. It is not known for its stand in areas of justice and information for the information poor of the world. Perhaps we need to give some deeper thought to what the profession may be able to contribute, in a positive way, to the oppressed, information poor.

I would like to see the LAA open up this whole area for debate. I would also like to see the profession become more actively aware of the whole third world question, and ponder ways in which, like other professional bodies, it could become actively involved.

There is much to ponder. I hope we do so, and become richer human beings for it.

'This above all: to thine own self be true . . .'
Hamlet I.iii

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