

Introductory Statement

By
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To the
Beacon of Freedom Symposium
At the
Library of Alexandria
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I. Introduction: An Inspiring Legacy

Excellencies, Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a distinct honor to welcome you all to the Bibliotheca Alexandrina (BA), the New library of Alexandria, erected 1600 years after the disappearance of its illustrious namesake...erected on the very spot where for over six centuries, the name of the Library of Alexandria had represented the zenith of learning and of tolerance.

That ancient institution, whose spirit we are trying to recapture today, created a space of freedom where the great thinkers of the age, scientists, mathematicians, poets from all cultures came to study and exchange ideas. It was initially founded as the Mouseion, or temple to the muses, which was part academy, part research center, and part library.

700,000 scrolls, the equivalent of more than 100,000 modern printed books, filled the shelves. Girls and boys studied regularly at the Ancient Library. The library was open to scholars from all cultures, and their interactive dialogues produced some of humanity's greatest achievements... On this very spot:

- Aristarchus was the first person to state that the earth revolves the sun, a full 1800 years before Copernicus;
- Eratosthenes proved that the earth was spherical and calculated its circumference with amazing accuracy, 1700 years before Columbus sailed on his epic voyage
- Euclid wrote his element of geometry, the basic text studied in schools all over the world even now

- Herophylus identified the brain as the controlling organ of the body and launched a new era of medicine
- Manetho chronicled the pharaohs and organized our history into the dynasties we use to this day

They and many other were all members of that amazing community of scholars, which mapped the heavens, organized the calendar, established the foundations of science and pushed the boundaries of our knowledge as they unleashed the human mind on myriad quests. They opened up the cultures of the world, established a true dialogue of civilizations, promoted rationality, tolerance and understanding and organized universal knowledge. Indeed, it was at the library of Alexandria that the Old Testament was first translated from Hebrew into Greek, the famous Septuagint.

So, by its very history, this is indeed the spot where we should meet to launch the Beacon of Freedom project, to reclaim for the New Library of Alexandria, some of the luster and the role of its ancestor...

II. The New Library Of Alexandria

Excellencies, Ladies and gentlemen,

I know that there are some here who would ask, why this library, no matter how beautiful the architecture of the building, should be taking a leading role in this important international enterprise? I submit, that we are worthy of the confidence of our friend from Norway and beyond, of that we are up to the international commitment that we are being asked to make. We speak with confidence because we represent a truly unique institution...

We are a national institution mandated. We are dedicated to the values of tolerance, openness to the other, rationality, science, dialogue, learning and understanding. Our unique status has been recognized by a very special law, law no.1 of 2001, the first law of the new millennium! Our distinguished international Board of Trustees has set four goals for the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, the New Library of Alexandria, to recapture the spirit of the original.

It aspires to be

- The World's window on Egypt:

- Egypt's window on the world,
- A leading institution of the digital age; and, above all;
- A center for leaning, tolerance, dialogue and understanding.

To fulfill that role, the new complex is much more than a library. It contains:

- A library that can hold millions of books;
- A center for the Internet and its archive;
- Specialized libraries for audio-visual materials, rare books, the visually impaired, children and the young.
- Museums of antiquities, manuscripts, and the history of science,
- A planetarium
- Two permanent exhibitions and six art galleries for temporary exhibitions,
- A conference center for 3000 persons
- Five research institutes, covering manuscripts, documentation of heritage, calligraphy, Information Sciences, and science.

This enormous complex would not have been possible if Egypt's commitment had not been so generously supported by many friends, who share the dream of reviving the spirit of the ancient library in terms suited to the new millennium. Our thanks go to each and every one of them...

But it is the content of the building, its staff and its activities that will reality to the vision, and prove that we are indeed worthy heirs of the great and ancient institution.

And today, we are gathered to do just that: to give substance to that dream, to give content to the slogans and to take firm steps on the path of asserting the principles we stand for.

III. Why Freedom Of Expression

Freedom of expression is today recognized as a universal good. It was not always so. Even in the golden age of ancient Greece, Socrates was put to death, and Plato's republic was an Orwellian nightmare. The last few millennia have been one long struggle for acceptance of human rights, of

expanding the scope for freedom of choice and of action... all of which would not have been possible without the freedom of expression, gained slowly and at great cost, and constantly defended again at all times, in all places, against the incursions that are constantly waged against it by the forces of societal repression.

We value freedom of expression above all other freedoms because it is the foundation of self-fulfillment. “The right to express one’s thoughts and to communicate freely with others affirms the dignity and worth of each and every member of society, and allows each individual to realize his or her full human potential. Thus, freedom of expression is an end in itself-and as such, deserves society’s greatest protection” (ACLU).

Without freedom of enquiry, and of expression, there can be no scientific advancement. Freedom, as much as imagination and boldness, is at the heart of the search for the truth and the attainment of knowledge. The history of science is replete with official repression, from Hypatia to Galileo. Even today, there are those who would restrict the teaching of evolution, or dismiss the findings of genetics.

It’s necessary to any viable system of self-government. If people are to make decisions and elect their government. If they are to check its excesses and root out corruption, they must be well-informed and have access to different ideas and points of view. Mass ignorance is a breeding ground for intolerance and bigotry, which in turn leads to oppression and tyranny. John Stuart Mill, contended that enlightened judgment only if one considers all facts and ideas, from whatever source, and tests one’s own conclusions against opposing views.

Freedom of expression is needed, because there is no telling when a minority view—often considered “bad” or socially harmful—will become a majority view... So much of what we take for granted today such as basic human rights and universal suffrage, were once considered dangerously seditious. In the end, only ideas defeat ideas. Society benefits by having a market-place of ideas.

Finally, expression is not just in language in its spoken form. It is also in the language of art as much as of science. That is why our Law no.1 for 2001 has listed in article 1, that ...[the BA should be concerned with]...”all products of the human mind, in all languages, from all cultures, ancient and

recent.” It recognizes the language of music and painting and sculpture as much as the language of words and sentences. The BA is dedicated to all forms of expression.

IV. Social Quandaries.

But if societies have increasingly come to accept that freedom of expression is beneficial and should be protected, they have also sought to limit it in various ways. This is true in varying degrees of all societies. It holds for the United States and France as much as for Egypt.

Indeed, most societies legislate to strike a balance between the interests of the community and the rights of the individual. That boundary is never absolute.

Much has been done to liberalize the climate of debate and discussion in Egypt, and much remains to be done. Today, Egypt has 479 officially licensed newspapers, journals and magazines, up from 220 some 20 years ago. There is a wide margin of freedom of expression, and different segments of society are struggling to set the boundaries of the permissible and the acceptable. This is a struggle that must be joined on the side of liberty and freedom of thought and expression by all caring individuals. But it is no different than the ongoing struggles that all societies confront at all times.

Since we are talking of books and art, let us focus on a few of the key cases that have been much in the press in the last few years, and specifically the issues of the presence of books in libraries as opposed to distribution, and the right of the artist to have the state subsidize their work with taxpayer money.

Those concerned with this issue inevitably cite the cases of the storm over the book of Haidar Haidar (feast of seaweed [check exact English title]), the case of Maxime Rodinson's book on Muhammad at the AUC and the three books that were being published by the Ministry of Culture and were withdrawn under a barrage of objections. All of these cases are real, but are rather misinterpreted.

In every society there is an ongoing debate about the boundaries of the socially acceptable especially for schools and for taxpayer-supported

activities. Thus the United States, considered by most journalists to be the paragon of free speech, effectively legislated against the teaching of Darwin in the state of Kansas. This is less than two ten years ago, where for two years evolution could not be taught in the schools of Kanas until the government decision was repealed as a result of a direct compaign by American scientists. Schools districts in Texas and Florida have raised questions about the suitability of J.D. Salinger's Catcher in the Rve and the appropriateness of the image of blacks in Mark Twain's Huckelerry Finn. Efforts to ban these books from the schools and from the shelves of the public libraries continue to this day.

Regardless of the merits of the cases concerted, they all highlight the fact that society makes a distinction between what is the right of Twain or Salinger to write oor say, and what is appropriate to be in a school crriculum. The question of Rodinson's biography of Muhammad falls into the same category Whether the AUC, as a private institution should be forced to abide by a majority view, or even to take into account the views of irate parents or even of the Minister of Higher Education is another matter.

The objects of the majority, or even a vocal minority, to what they deem to be offensive in what others consider to be works of art as old as art itself. The church fathers found Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel offensive, and even forced some additional painting to cover the genitalia of the nudes. That gesture is today viewed with derision, but in its day, it reflected a timeless conflict between conservation views and art. More recently, in the United States, the conflict over what constitutes art and what is acceptable to view in public has been tested all the way to the Supreme Court, leading to the famous statement by Justice Potter Stewart that while he could not define pornography legally, he could recognize it when he saw it. The inherently subjective boundaries of the acceptable are defined by different communities differently at different times and different places. This is a social function, where the rights of the minority view to exist, does not mean that the majority has to condone ir or support it. And all societies try to protect children and the weak from" inappropriate material"... That is why we have ratings to guide parents taking children into films, but we do not forbid the production of the films.

But should the state (with taxpayer money) .subsidize the production of works that are inherently offensive to the vast majority of these taxpayers?

That question was brought into relief in the US by the cases of the Maplethorpe exhibit and the Serano sculpture. In the 1990s, Robert Maplethorpe's portfolio of pictures, largely erotic and homosexual, was deemed pornographic, and the Corcoran gallery cancelled the show under intense pressure, while Serano's crucifix in urine resulted in a debate in congress on the appropriateness of using taxpayer money to support activities that were deemed offensive by the vast majority of those paying the taxes. That is the same case that occurred with the three books withdrawn by the Egyptian ministry of culture under intense public pressure.

Indeed is the relevant to highlight that [in *NEA vs. Finley et al.*; 1998] the supreme Court of the US found that not being funded by the state for your artistic project does not constitute a first amendment breach against your freedom of expression.

Finding a balance between the wishes of the majority and the rights the rights of the minority is what it is all about. The same situation arises in order countries as well. Thus the case of the scarf worn by a young girl to school in Creil, France, resulted in a furor over what was seen as a symbol of Islamism in a secular society, and an intrusion of religion in public schools. This raised the question as to why a cross, worn as jewelry by another girl, did not involve a religious symbol but a headscarf did? The questions are difficult to answer, and every society has to define its own boundaries.

Yet this is not a case of moral relativism, for no society should be allowed to define its own boundaries in ways that infringe upon the fundamental rights of the minority. Any local perception of boundaries must, at a minimum, respect what has been defined in the universal declaration of human rights. The universal possess by virtue of being human, without regard to the society to which they belong.

Not all great democracies can pass that test either: the US still favors the death penalty and a number of European countries have refused to extradite persons to the US for the reason.

But back to the issues of censorship. In the case of the United States the questioning of the use of public funds to finance artistic products that the majority of taxpayers find offensive is no different than the questioning of the Egyptian ministry of culture about its publication and distribution to three books that many Egyptians find offensive. The case of the pressures

exercised by segments of society in Egypt to withdraw from circulation the Haidar book. The pressures on the Kansas schools to forbid the teaching of evolution, and the public school reading lists and public library shelves under assault from conservative forces in American society are no different than the Egyptian conservatives assault on the AUC curriculum and the public distribution of books they find offensive. In the case of the US the sources of the conservative wing tend to be Christian while in Egypt they tend to be Muslim. It is to be expected given the religious affiliations of the majority of the population in the two countries.

These fights over boundaries are really flights between the conservative and liberal wings of any society, and tend to be found over time and again.

There can be no question as to my personal position on these issues. Our presence, all of us here today, attests to our collective commitment to freedom of expression.

Libraries have a major role to play, and the BA has an especially relevant role to play here... The availability of this material somewhere is not only needed for the collective memory of a society, or even for a balanced view of the world, it is very much what people expect of libraries.

Libraries are the champions of freedom of expression, because it is their vocation to be custodians of the products of the human mind. Indeed it is not surprising to note that the Boston Coalition for freedom of Expression, which started giving out awards in 1990s, gave its first award to the ACLU and its second award to the American Library Association.

I recently answered a question by someone concerned about whether an offensive book could be found in the Library, and why it should be there. My answer was, that there is a difference between the availability of material sitting passively in a library and the active distribution of material to the public. There is a difference between scholarly gatherings and mass events. Besides, if that concerned person wanted to write a rebuttal to that book he found so offensive, where would he go to find a copy, if not at a library?

Indeed reference libraries, such as the Vatican Library, held copies of all the banned books, even at times when people were burned at the stake for reading banned works!

My friends,

The real issues of censorship: from Taha Hussain to Nasr Hamid AduZeid are not so much government actions or the legislative climate, even if that can certainly be improved, even if that can certainly be improved... The real issue is in the intolerance that permeates a society.. the unwillingness to recognize that the only legitimate way to defeat an idea is with another idea, not by harassment or banning of books...

The BA is committed to help create this space of freedom for dialogue between individuals, cultures and civilizations...

V. Banned Books

The Banned Books of the world represent a strange mixture of great classics and marginal and obscure works. Yet they have succeeded at some level to challenge the conventions of their times and place and to force to think.. even if to reject the offending material... Such books represent an important research for scholars from all over the world, and the affirmation of the importance of their presence somewhere is an affirmation of the importance that we attach to freedom of expression. For in the end, it is offending speech that needs protection, not acceptable speech. Societies are well-served if they remember that and recall Voltaire's dictum: "I may differ with your views, but I am willing to lay down my life to protect your right to express these views , but I am willing to lay down my life to protect your right to express these views I disagree with" ...

Today, at the BA, with our distinguished visitors and many friends, we assert that right by housing a bibliographic listing of all those books.

Today we launch the drive to a big international conference in about a year to address the importance of freedom of expression.

Today by showing the beautiful exhibit of Art for freedom held outside these doors, we confirm that artistic expression and freedom are indivisible,

Today by our display of the World Press Photo exhibition in our main reading room, we underline our link to the pres of the world and to the mirror that they hold to our societies where we still spend 14 times more on military than on development.

Today, the BA stands proudly to house the Beacon for freedom Project and we look forward to working with all like-minded persons to advance these goals...

VI. The dawn Of A New Era

Excellencies, Ladies and gentlemen,

As we look into the past history of humanity: banned books and works of art have been part of the long struggle for emancipation. WE have discussed the special role of libraries in this matrix of issues that each society struggles with... Today at the BA we are also conscious that we need to open up the windows and in the words of Gandhi, engraved under his bust in the Library:

“I do not want my windows to be stuffed... I want all the cultures of the world to blow about my house freely, but I refuse to be blown off my feet by any..”

But we are at the dawn of a new age, where the digital future beckons, and calls to us into lands unknown.. where copyright and legal issues will be different, but where the greatest dreams become possible.. to have all material available at all times from everywhere to everywhere...

The Internet will make this possible. And the BA is proud to be the only existing back-up center for the Internet Archive outside of California. The new revolution in ICT makes practices of the past moot, and confounds old legal definitions of what is published publicly and what is private..

Whether this new world will be a libertarian jungle, with no rules other than the market remains to be seen...The market is a good servant but a bad master...

But this is the task for the future..to create some order out of chaos, to make the valuable more readily accessible, while seeking to protect the rights of all to freedom of expression...

To build this new digital world of connectivity and content, we must go forth and fashion the wise constraints that make people free...

Thank you.