

# Really mortified

by Anna Berkes - October 4, 2009

In case you didn't know, it was Banned Books Week (<http://www.bannedbooksweek.org/>), last week - the American Library Association decreed it. And if you're following the Thomas Jefferson's Monticello Facebook (<http://www.facebook.com/business/dashboard/?ref=sb#/pages/Charlottesville-VA/Thomas-Jeffersons-Monticello/19539988695?ref=ts>), page, you will already have caught a glimpse of what I'm going to be talking about here. (I should have suspected those guys would scoop me when I told them about this little episode a few weeks ago! They looked way too interested...)

Anyway, I did some research on this letter exchange for a talk I gave at the Covenant School here in town last week, so I might as well get some more mileage out of it. The story goes like this:

On November 25, 1812, a man named Regnault de Bécourt wrote to Thomas Jefferson, offering him a copy of his book, *La Création du Monde...* ([http://openlibrary.org/b/OL17712628M/cre%CC%81ation\\_du\\_monde\\_ou\\_Syste%CC%81ome\\_d%27organismes](http://openlibrary.org/b/OL17712628M/cre%CC%81ation_du_monde_ou_Syste%CC%81ome_d%27organismes)) (Philadelphia, 1813). Jefferson agreed to buy a copy and asked Bécourt to see Jefferson's Philadelphia book dealer, Nicolas Dufief, and have Dufief put the cost of the book (\$2) on Jefferson's account there.

All seemed well. Then, 5 months later, Jefferson received a distraught letter from Dufief (<http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mtjI&fileName=mtjIpage047.db&recNum=367>). It's in French, but you might actually find it even more amusing if you don't know French, because to us ignoramuses it looks like: "blah blah blah le blah two dollars blah blah blah." Anyway, the gist is that Dufief has found himself in something of a legal pickle, having been accused of selling a copy of the aforementioned M. de Bécourt's book to Jefferson, and Dufief asks for Jefferson's help in exonerating him. The wily M. de Bécourt neglected to mention that the book contained some inflammatory statements vis-a-vis religion, and now it seems the legal authorities are coming down on Dufief for purveying Bécourt's blasphemous scribblings.

Anyway, if you know anything about Jefferson you will know that nothing is more guaranteed to elicit a long impassioned screed than an infringement on intellectual freedom. Stand back! Jefferson sends back a two-page letter (<http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mtjI&fileName=mtjIpage047.db&recNum=394>), in which he lays out - in grand, eloquent Jeffersonian fashion - all of the most basic arguments against banning books. Here's the whole thing for your consumption:

Dear Sir Your favor of the 6th inst. is just recieved, and I shall with equal willingness and truth state the degree of agency you had respecting the copy of M. de Becourt's book which came to my hands. that gentleman informed me by letter that he was about to publish a volume in French 'sur la Creation du monde, ou Systeme d'organisation primitive,' which, it's title promised to be either a geological, or astronomical work. I subscribed; and, when published, he sent me a copy; and as you were my correspondent in the book-line in Philadelphia, I took the liberty of desiring him to call on you for the price, which he afterwards informed me you were so kind as to pay him for me, being, I believe, 2. Dollars. but the sole copy which came to me was from himself directly, and, as far as I know, was never seen by you.

I am really mortified to be told that, in the United States of America, a fact like this can become a subject of enquiry, and of criminal enquiry too, as an offence against religion: that a question about the sale of a book can be carried before the civil magistrate. is this then our freedom of religion? and are we to have a Censor whose imprimatur shall say what books may be sold, and what we may buy? and who is thus to dogmatise religious opinions for our citizens? whose foot is to be the measure to which ours are all to be cut or stretched? is a Priest to be our Inquisitor, or shall a layman, simple as ourselves, set up his reason as the rule for what we are to read, & what we must believe? it is an insult to our citizens to question whether they are rational beings or not; and blasphemy against religion to suppose it cannot stand the test of truth and reason. if M. de Becourt's book be false in it's facts, disprove them; if false in it's reasoning, refute it. but, for god's sake, let us freely hear both sides, if we chuse. I know little of it's contents, having barely glanced over here and there a passage, and over the table of contents. from this the Newtonian philosophy seemed the chief object of attack, the issue of which might be trusted to the strength of the two combatants; Newton certainly not needing the auxiliary arm of the government, and still less the holy author of our religion as to what in it concerns him. I thought the work would be very innocent, and one which might be confided to the reason of any man; not likely to be much read, if let alone, but if persecuted, it will be generally read. every man in the US. will think it a duty to buy a copy, in vindication of his right to buy, and to read what he pleases. I have been just reading the new constitution of Spain. one of it's fundamental bases is expressed in these words. 'the Roman Catholic religion, the only true one, is, & always shall be that of the Spanish nation. the government protects it by wise & just laws, and prohibits the exercise of any other whatever.' now I wish this presented to those who question what you may sell, or we may buy, with a request to strike out the words 'Roman catholic' and to insert the denomination of their own religion. this would ascertain the code of dogmas which each wishes should domineer over the opinions of all others, & be taken like the Spanish religion, under the 'protection of wise and just laws.' it would shew to what they wish to reduce the liberty for which one generation has sacrificed life and happiness. it would present our boasted freedom of religion as a thing of theory only, & not of practice, as what would be a poor exchange for the theoretic thralldom, but practical freedom of Europe. but it is impossible that the laws of Pensylvania, which set us the first example of the wholesome & happy effects of religious freedom, can permit these inquisitorial functions to be proposed to their courts. under them you are surely safe.

*At the date of yours of the 6th you had not recieved mine of the 3d inst. asking a copy of an edition of Newton's principia which I had seen advertised. when the cost of that shall be known, it shall be added to the balance of 4. D 93 c and incorporated with a larger remittance I have to make to Philadelphia. Accept the assurance of my great esteem & respect*  
Th: Jefferson

TJ's really at his best when he's roused to write in defense of freedom, isn't he? One couldn't ask for a more eloquent spokesman for Not Banning Books. Which is great for our theme this week, but not so great for Dufief. The beleaguered bookseller received Jefferson's diatribe and probably concluded that his heated words would only cause more trouble; Dufief wrote back, pleading for just a simple straightforward letter stating that Dufief did not sell Jefferson That Book. TJ never complied, apparently.

I assume that Dufief was able to wriggle out of the legal charges. At least, there are no later letters from Dufief postmarked from the slammer, asking TJ to send muffins and pickaxes. One presumes that Dufief was forced to use the letter above as an affidavit that he did not sell the naughty book in question. Although it is clearly not the nice straightforward statement that Dufief would have preferred, one has to think: what would the Philadelphia court authorities' reaction have been when presented with an irate letter from the former President of the United States, arguing circles around them and chastizing them sharply for even contemplating prosecuting such a thing? One is reminded in this instance that, on top of all the other things that Jefferson had been and done in his long life, he was also a lawyer. No wonder the whole thing apparently fizzled.

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