



Abba Hillel Silver Collection Digitization Project

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Series I: General Correspondence, 1914-1969, undated.

Sub-series A: Alphabetical, 1914-1965, undated.

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MacLeish, Archibald, 1948-1949.

ARCHIBALD MacLEISH

20 September 1948

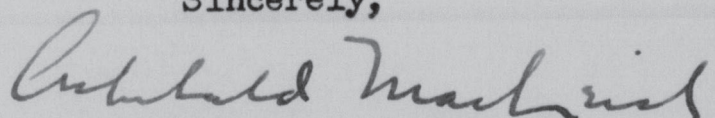
Dear Rabbi Silver:

I would deeply appreciate having your agreement,
as I hope the case will be, to sign " An Appeal to
Reason and Conscience."

You will be interested to know that among the
fifty signatories already received are Mrs Roosevelt,
Mark Ethridge, Bishop Gilbert, Dr. Harry Emerson
Fosdick, Dean Virginia Gildersleeve, Dr. Robert
Hutchins, Professor William Hocking, Sumner Welles
and Charles Seymour.

May I hear from you within the week?

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Archibald MacLeish".

Archibald MacLeish

An Appeal to Reason and Conscience

In Defense of the Right of Freedom of Inquiry in the United States

On June 8 the Board of Superintendents of New York City schools closed the schools to *The Nation*, the oldest liberal magazine in the United States. This action was taken without advance notice to *The Nation* or to the people of the city, without hearing, and without announcement of any kind, either to the magazine or to the public. The only opportunity afforded to the magazine to defend itself, or to citizens to be heard, was at a meeting of the Board from which the press was excluded, and which was called as the result of public protests some weeks after the decision had accidentally become known. Following this proceeding, the Board reaffirmed its decision by unanimous vote. Other communities thereupon followed suit by similar unilateral action. In Massachusetts, *The Nation* was banned from the State's teachers' colleges by a public official who admitted he had not, at the time of the banning, himself investigated the reason given by the New York Board for its action.

That reason was the publication by *The Nation* in 1947 and 1948 of a series of articles by Paul Blanshard, for many years Commissioner of Investigations and Accounts of the City of New York in the La Guardia Administration. Mr. Blanshard's articles described and criticized the official position of the Catholic Church in such matters as education, science, medicine, marriage and divorce, democracy and fascism. The Board stated that there were passages in these articles which a Catholic would find objectionable on grounds of faith.

It is the opinion of the undersigned that the action of the New York Board of Superintendents raises an issue of the greatest gravity to the people of the city and of the country. It is not an issue between Catholics and non-Catholics. There are Catholics among us and none of us, whether Catholic or not, have been moved to protest by reason of hostility to the Catholic faith. Neither is the issue raised a mere issue of fact with regard to the articles themselves. We agree with the Board that there are sincere Catholics and men of good will who object on grounds of faith to certain statements in Mr. Blanshard's articles. Indeed, some of us who are not Catholics disagree with certain of Mr. Blanshard's statements.

The issue as we see it is the issue of principle which the Board's action, and the Board's statements in defense of its action, present. The question before the Board was not the question of the suitability of *The Nation* as a text book in the City's schools. The question was whether *The Nation*, which had long been one of the periodicals available to New York City students, should continue to be available to them. In ruling that it should not, and in giving its publication of the Blanshard articles as justification, the Board in effect enunciated two propositions both of which in our opinion are contrary to American ideas of freedom and destructive of American principles.

The first is the proposition that any published material regarded, or which could be regarded, as objectionable on grounds of faith or creed by any group in the community should be excluded from the community's schools and school libraries.

The second is the proposition that the appearance in any publication of material of this kind justifies the suppression in schools and school libraries of the publication as a whole. In the case of a periodical this means that the past publication of such material justifies the suppression of future issues regardless of the general character and record of the periodical.

The vice of the second of these two propositions is apparent upon its face. The exclusion from public institutions, by public officials, of future issues of newspapers, magazines or other periodicals on the basis of particular material published in the past, rather than on the basis of the character of the publication as a whole, cannot be defended even as censorship. It is extra-judicial punishment pure and simple, and it involves a power of intimidation and possible blackmail in officials of government which no free society can tolerate and which a free press could not long survive. To permit public officials, in their unlimited, extra-judicial discretion, to stigmatize an established and respected magazine or newspaper as unfit for students to read because of the publication of a specific article or series of articles, or of particular paragraphs in a specific article or series, is to confer an arbitrary and dictatorial power which is wholly foreign to the American tradition and to the laws and Constitution in which the American tradition is expressed.

The first proposition—that any publication objectionable on grounds of faith to any group in the community should be suppressed in the schools—though more plausible on its face, is equally vicious in fact. It is a repudiation, on one side, of the principle of freedom of education; on the other, of the principle of the separation of church and state. The meaning of that latter tenet, so far as education is concerned, is that no church may use the public schools as instruments of its propaganda. To give the churches of the country, or any of their members who might seek to exercise it, the power to determine by simple veto what shall *not* be available to students in the public schools, or, worse, for public officials to exclude automatically anything any group might be expected to wish excluded, is to do by negative action what the Constitution and the Courts forbid by positive action.

The argument offered in defense of this revolutionary proposal is apparently that religion cannot be criticized in American education. There is nothing in American law or in the American tradition which says that religion cannot be criticized in education, nor does the principle of the separation of church and state involve any such consequence. On the contrary, the American Republic was founded, and the American continent was settled, by people whose actions were in large part an expression of their criticism of certain established religions. Criticism of religion can certainly take forms which are unsuitable to schools, just as political controversy can take forms which are the opposite of instructive. But the doctrine that the criticism of religion must be outlawed *as such* in American education is a proposition which has no justification in American experience. Ignorance is notoriously the worst foundation for tolerance, and the American people have never felt that it was the purpose of education to teach their children to be blind.

The truth is that the suppression of ideas impoverishes human life and warps the human mind in an increasing and progressive sickness. Those who practice it are led by the logic of one exclusion to the tragedy of the next. If the suppression of *The Nation* for having published the Blanshard articles is allowed to stand, and if the propositions upon which it is justified are accepted, the consequences to the schools, to the press and to the vitality of American freedom may well be very serious indeed.

Newspapers and periodicals will be obliged to omit news and comment which any group in any denomination, Catholic or other, regards as objectionable or run the risk of being suppressed in the public schools, with all that such suppression means in terms of the loss of good name and good will. The standard of education will become the teaching, not of the truth, but of that part of the truth to which no group objects—with the result that the bigotry and ignorance of minorities will dictate the knowledge of the whole people. Scientific works containing accepted scientific facts about the shape of the earth, the history of the universe and the functions of the human body, objectionable to various denominational groups, will be withdrawn. The whole of American Puritan literature, a principal source of our spiritual tradition, will be expunged for its criticism of the Church of England and the Church of Rome. Books of history which tell the truth about the persecution of Catholics by Protestants, the hanging of Quakers on Boston Common, the sufferings of Baptists in Massachusetts Bay, the reasons for the Protestant Reformation and the practices of the Spanish Inquisition will be censored as objectionable to one church or another. Jefferson with his attacks on the priestcraft of Massachusetts and Rome will be proscribed. Tom Paine will disappear. Jonathan Edwards will be silenced.

The events of the last ten years should have taught us all—the New York Board of Superintendents included—that there is no escape from the difficult problems of our time by suppression. Neither teachers nor librarians nor anyone else can devise a formula of caution which will free responsible officers from the exercise of judgment or protect them from the passions of those who, whatever lip service they may pay to freedom, do not approve of freedom when their own beliefs are challenged. The only test with books and periodicals as with men is the individual test—the decision of each case on its merits. Is this book or this periodical, *regarded as a whole*, a serious and responsible exercise of the right of free inquiry and free report? If it is, and if it deals with matters within the general interest of the citizens, in terms which students can understand, then there is no justification for its suppression because an article, or a group of articles, or several passages scattered through various articles, are objectionable to special groups, whatever the grounds of the objection. If it is not a responsible exercise of the right of free inquiry and free report—if, for example, a publication, considered as a whole, is found to be an attempt not to get at the truth but to disseminate hatred of a race or a faith or a group by the distortion or suppression of the truth or by forgery and lies—then it should receive the special handling that such material is generally accorded by American libraries. Certainly the fact that religious questions are often controversial is not a reason for suppressing them in the nation's schools. One of the principal purposes of American education should be to see to it that no generation grows up in ignorance of the controversial issues it will have to face.

In our opinion the solution of this entire problem requires that the school authorities in the City of New York give up forthwith their claim to dictate what the children of New York shall *not* read. In place of issuing a permissive list of books and periodicals, as they now do, they should return to the democratic practice of issuing an advisory list. That list should be drafted with the counsel of a group representing the best and most disinterested judgment available in the city, carefully chosen so as to avoid dominance by any special interest and expressly protected from special influences however exercised. Both the advisory group and the school authorities, moreover, should give up the notion that there are any subjects which are verboten to the children of America or that the likes and dislikes of any group in the community can be permitted to dictate the limitations of the knowledge of the rest.

Had these fair, decent and democratic considerations been applied in the case of *The Nation* the suppression would have been unthinkable. *The Nation* is one of the most respected periodicals in the world today. For more than eighty years it has been a courageous champion of minority rights and democratic causes. No one has questioned and no one can question the record of its total achievement under its present editor or under her predecessors. The Blanshard articles, however objectionable certain passages may have been to certain readers, deal with subjects which most Americans regard as matters of public concern, and deal with them in a serious and responsible way. If they are in error the error can be demonstrated in the same spirit of free examination of the facts, not by the condemnation and punishment of the magazine in which they appeared.

To bar from the schools of New York future issues of one of the country's leading periodicals with a history of responsible journalism since 1865 because a past issue or issues contained paragraphs which one of the many groups which compose this country found objectionable seems to us a violation of the most fundamental principles of American equality. We believe the wrong should be righted at once, not so much in the interest of *The Nation* as in the interest of the people of the United States.

Samuel Hopkins Adams
Dr. Henry A. Atkinson
George Axtelle
Dr. Wade Crawford Barclay
Ralph Bennett
Mrs. Mary McLeod Bethune
George Biddle
Sarah Gibson Blanding
Isaiah Bowman
Charles C. Burlingham
Erwin D. Canham
Robert K. Carr
Zechariah Chafee, Jr.
Grenville Clark
Henry Steele Commager
Arthur H. Compton
J. M. Dawson
Dale DeWitt
W. E. B. Du Bois
Mark F. Ethridge
Marshall Field III
Dorothy Canfield Fisher
Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick
Nathan Frankel
Gilbert W. Gabriel
Lewis Gannett
Lloyd K. Garrison
Ray Gibbons
Bishop Charles K. Gilbert
Virginia C. Gildersleeve
Frank Goldman
Frank P. Graham
Martha Graham
Erwin Nathaniel Griswald
Harold K. Guinzburg
Oscar Hammerstein II

Moss Hart
Arthur Garfield Hays
Rt. Rev. Henry W. Hobson
William Ernest Hocking
Hamilton Holt
Mildred McAfee Horton
Charles H. Houston
Byrn J. Hovde
Palmer Hoyt
Charles E. Hughes, Jr.
Robert M. Hutchins
Samuel Guy Inman
Alvin Johnson
Charles S. Johnson
Howard Mumford Jones
Alice V. Keliher
Dorothy Kenyon
William Heard Kilpatrick
Leon Kroll
Christopher LaFarge
Dr. Harry Laidler
Herbert H. Lehman
Monte M. Lemann
Max Lerner
Eduard C. Lindeman
Alain Locke
Robert S. Lynd
Marshall MacDuffie
Dr. John A. Mackay
Archibald MacLeish
Thomas Mann
Benjamin E. Mays
Ralph E. McGill
Millicent Carey McIntosh
Alexander Meiklejohn

Ernest O. Melby
Frederick Melcher
Clyde R. Miller
Perry Miller
Lewis Mumford
Edward R. Murrow
Allan Nevins
Reinhold Niebuhr
Howard W. Odum
Bishop G. Bromley Oxnam
Bishop Edward Lambe Parsons
Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt
Mrs. Henry P. Russel
Rose Russell
Rose Schneiderman
Budd Schulberg
Lisa Sergio
Charles Seymour
Dr. Guy Emery Shippler
Paul C. Smith
Arthur B. Spingarn
William B. Spofford, Jr.
Justice Meier Steinbrink
Rex Stout
Clarence Streit
Harold Taylor
Norris L. Tibbetts
Carl Van Doren
Mark Van Doren
James P. Warburg
Goodwin Watson
Sumner Welles
Gene Weltfish
James Waterman Wise
Dr. Stephen S. Wise
Louise Leonard Wright