

THE HOTTEST PLACE IN HELL: The Crisis of Neutrality in Contemporary Librarianship

by Joseph Good

*“Mischiate sono a quel cattivo coro
de li angeli che non furon ribelli
nè fur fedeli a Dio, ma per sè fuoro.”*

(They intermingle with that wicked band
of angels, not rebellious and not faithful
to God, who held themselves apart.)

Dante Alighieri, *Divine Comedy, Inferno,*
Canto III, lines 37-39

Contrary to common belief, the hottest places in hell, at least according to Dante Alighieri, are not, strictly speaking, reserved for those who remain neutral during times of crisis. That’s not to say that the neutrally inclined get off easily in Dante’s celestial paradigm, though. Dante places those who were neither for nor against God – “*non furon ribelli nè fur fedeli*” – in a region all their own at the very mouth of hell. Their lot is particularly unenviable, as Dante’s guide, Virgil, relates:

*Questi non hanno speranza di morte,
e la lor cieca vita è tanto bassa,
che ‘nvidiosi son d’ogne altra sorte.
Fama di loro il mondo esser non lassa;
misericordia e giustizia li sdegna:
non ragioniam di lor, ma guarda e passa.*

(They have no hope of death,
and their blind life is so abject
that they are envious of every other lot.
‘The world does not permit report of them.
Mercy and justice hold them in contempt.
Let us not speak of them – look and pass by.)¹

This sounds bad enough. It is therefore curious that history incorrectly attributes Dante as having consigned those guilty of neutrality to the hottest places in hell. Isn’t “blind life,” abjectness, and the envy of “every other

lot” rather enough, considering what else lies writhing in Hell (according to Dante’s witness)?

The fact is, the first connection between Dante and the “ultimate sin” of neutrality was made by President John F. Kennedy, Jr. Kennedy gave a speech on June 24, 1963, in Bonn, Germany, at the signing of the charter of the German Peace Corps. During that event, Kennedy made the following remark: “Dante once said that the hottest places in hell are reserved for those who in a period of moral crisis maintain their neutrality.”² Perhaps he was mistakenly thinking of the aforementioned lines 37-65 of Canto III in Dante’s *Inferno*; or, perhaps Kennedy was confident that Dante, in his expansive view of human morality, had equated neutrality and the lack of moral initiative with the greatest sin a human being was capable of. After all, we should consider the times Kennedy was emerging from; Europe had been torn to shreds by two world wars in the past fifty years, the later of which had very nearly annihilated an entire people by the most horrific kind of genocide. Indeed, the Holocaust itself would never have been as efficient as it was without the willing, in fact the eager, participation of the police departments and para-militaries of the nations that became subordinate to the Third Reich, such as France.³ The “neutrality” of the Frenchmen and Germans who stood by while their friends and neighbors were shipped off to Buchenwald and Natzweiler-Struthof may well have been on Kennedy’s mind as he stood on German soil and spoke that day in 1963.

So what precisely is meant by “neutral,” anyway? Switzerland seems emblematic of “neutrality.” Yet the Swiss government, in tandem with the Swiss banking system, conspired to smuggle millions of Deutschmarks of stolen Jewish money, in the form of gold bouillon, out of Nazi Germany during the height of the Holocaust.⁴ All the while, Switzerland maintained an official political neutrality that enabled it to preserve the integrity of its borders throughout and escape war crimes prosecution later on. One might question how “neutral” this “neutrality” was if Switzerland was acting as a covert banking agent for the Nazi regime while remaining politically uncommitted on the international front. This begs the further question: is this the true face of neutrality? Did Switzerland’s ostensive neutrality enable it to justify, on a moral level, financial dealings with the Nazi regime which ultimately contributed to the Holocaust? There is no escaping the definitiveness of Switzerland’s neutrality, since it was their statement *to the world*; in the end, Switzerland may have been more “neutral” than anyone suspected.

For it truly seems that somewhere in neutrality lays the negation of moral responsibility. President Kennedy and Dante Alighieri both understood that there is an inherent moral duty in the virtuous citizen to take hold of everyday events, to shape and define them. In Dante’s case, virtue was directly correlative with religious piety; in Kennedy’s case, with participation in electoral democracy. In both cases, however, these men understood the dangers of allowing people to become neutral observers

of history as it passed by. Kennedy perceived that such passivity led to uncontrollable downward spirals of political and social turmoil; Dante felt that moral indifference put a person's very soul at risk.

What are the social responsibilities of a librarian, vis-à-vis neutrality? The proposition that a librarian is responsible for neutrally communicating both sides of an issue, merely for the sake of ensuring that both sides are heard, seems fallacious, at best. Indeed, the very notion that both sides of an issue are inherently equal, and therefore entitled to an equal share of the public's attention, smacks of moral relativism. There's something more insidious, however, at work in such a practice. It is the perception that an idea must be given public hearing at all costs, regardless of its intrinsic worth. In such a case, the idea becomes secondary to the imperative to communicate the idea. The idea thereby loses any relevance in cultural or intellectual discourse.

Take, for instance, the argument presently raging over teaching intelligent design in America's classrooms. Gerald Graff, a professor of English at the University of Illinois, wrote a book in which he advised that instructors should "teach the conflict" surrounding an academic issue so students could understand its context. The deeper, tacit notion here is that knowledge is neither inertly given nor merely a matter of personal opinion, but rather, established in the furnace of controversy. The book is entitled *Beyond the Culture Wars: How Teaching the Conflict can Revitalize American Education*.

The religious right took hold of Graff's idea and, in his own words, "hijacked it." The culture war that Graff sought to ameliorate has now, perversely, incorporated Graff's own idea as a weapon to be unleashed on the disciples of rational humanism.⁵

Graff's idea allows the religious right to divert attention from the relative merit of the idea they are advocating – in this case, intelligent design – and focus instead on theoretical notions of freedom and investigation. Truth and reality diverge; the idea itself is no longer the focus of interest. Rather, the notion that an issue (regardless of its individual merits) should be entitled to at least as much academic exposure as its contrary, takes center stage in lieu of real intellectual labor devoted to the idea itself.

What are the consequences of this practice? Simply, that any idea can be validated once attention is deflected from its claims and attached instead to some general truth or value that can be sanctimoniously affirmed. One is left not with an argument for an idea, but merely the quasi-religious certainty that the idea must be advocated for the public good. If this is what a librarian is reduced to – airing arguments merely because they exist in opposition to popular, moral, or ethical ideas – then the librarian is indeed peddling a set of hollow wares: ideas denuded of any moral or intellectual consequence.

The librarian's very space in the fabric of social and political discourse is threatened by the practice of neutrality. By offering neutral responses in the increasingly partisan cultural atmosphere, the librarian denies him or herself the opportunity to definitively reverse the tide of negative educational trends which have seen the diminishment of the influence of the library in American society. Neutral responses to the vital issues of gay marriage, African-American reparations, and affirmative action, continually jeopardize the library's relevance in contemporary society. If the librarian cannot be motivated to take a stand on pressing social issues out of a sense of moral duty, certainly the librarian should break his or her neutrality in the name of self-interest.

Charles Knowles Bolton stated that "Ethics...have been inherent in his profession even when not expressed in a code."⁶ This moral/ethical focus of librarianship seems curiously gone astray these days. There is abundant discussion of professional standards and competencies, but little mention of an ethical basis for these standards. Without an ethical basis, these standards are fundamentally two-dimensional. It takes moral conviction to make a professional standard work; the habit of lackadaisically permitting any idea, no matter what its relative moral merit, to filter through the library to the patron, is an affront to the professional standards of the modern librarian.

Neutrality is the logical conclusion of moral relativism; it is the pose most naturally assumed as a result of an ethical regime whose standards are defined by transient events rather than by consistent and unswerving convictions. Moral relativism disavows any universally solid principles; it is a road to the hottest part of Hell with a stop in Auschwitz along the way. Mussolini's own words on the topic of moral relativism should serve as a clarion call to every librarian who presumes to sit on the fence and await the outcome of the socio-political conflict our public libraries now face:

Everything I have said and done in these last years is relativism by intuition...If relativism signifies contempt for fixed categories and men who claim to be the bearers of an objective, immortal truth...then there is nothing more relativistic than fascistic attitudes and activity.⁷

ENDNOTES

- 1 Alighieri, *Inferno*, Canto III, lines 46-65, Princeton Dante Project <www.princeton.edu/dante>
- 2 Quote # 1211, Bartleby's Quotations. <<http://www.bartleby.com/73/1211.html>>
- 3 For a thorough discussion of this phenomenon, see Susan Zuccotti's *The Holocaust, the French and the Jews*. NY: Basic Books, 1993. Susan Zuccotti is noted Holocaust expert and has authored, amongst authored works, *Under His Very Window: The Vatican and the Holocaust in Italy* (Yale University Press: 2000)
- 4 See Address to the United Jewish Appeal National Young Leadership Conference, Washington, DC, March 23, 1998 by Stuart Eizenstat, Under Secretary of State for

Economic, Business, and Agricultural Affairs http://www.state.gov/www/policy_remarks/1998/980323_eizenstat_ngold.html

- 5 For a further discussion, see Stanley Fish's recent article, "Academic Cross-Dressing: How Intelligent Design Gets its Arguments From the Left" in *Harpers* 311 (1867), December 2005
- 6 Bolton, Charles Knowles. "The Ethics of Librarianship: A Proposal for a Revised Code." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 101, The Ethics of the Professions and of Business (May, 1922) 138-146.
- 7 Benito Mussolini, *Diuturna*. Milan: Imperia, 1924, pgs. 374-377

