

Media and Censorship¹

Dr Tan Kim Huat

At its heart, censorship signifies the desire of a collective to protect its members from the influence of certain publications or materials that have been deemed undesirable through regulations. Such regulations may take the form of banning and suppression, or limiting of access according to age groups or qualifications. In order for such regulations to work effectively, punitive measures, often harsh, are put in place. The very presence of the phenomenon of censorship and the punitive measures that come in its wake is actually a tacit admission to the power of the media to influence people.

This at once leads us to the important question of what really are media, especially mass media. Unfortunately, there is no agreed definition² and I do not have the space, time or expertise to write exhaustively on this. Dr Daniel Koh's essay in the same issue will serve as a dependable guide. But what has commanded almost universal agreement is that the shape and form of mass media have changed significantly over the years, especially from the onset of the advent of the digital age and the internet. Through technological breakthroughs, there is now a convergence of the different forms of media and an easier access to them.³ As we shall see later, the latter will certainly raise the question whether any attempt at censoring is actually an exercise in futility.

Any form of censorship on any matter usually raises responses from the opposite ends of the spectrum: there will be those who are ardently in support of it just as there will be those who are utterly against it. Only rarely will there be a convergence of opinion.⁴ These diametrically opposed responses are indicative of the fact that there are some pertinent issues relating to censorship. These have been around for a long time, even before the advent of the digital age and the internet. First, there is the issue of content (or to put it differently, where is the line to be drawn?). Over

¹ This is a revised version of a talk given at the symposium organised by the Centre for the Development of Christian Ministry on 'The Christian and the Media' on 24 March 2001.

² Cf. the statement of Brenda Downes and Steve Miller, *Media Studies* (London: Hodder, 1998), p.1.

³ E.g. books, radio programmes, films, which were once separate forms of media could now be digitised and obtained through the internet. Increasingly, many application softwares are becoming multimedia.

⁴ Recently, many societies and countries agree that depiction of extreme violence and pornography featuring minors should be banned.

what does a society deem unsuitable? Is it nudity, violence, drug-taking, racist propaganda or religious broadcasting of a proselytising type? Why should such contents be barred or the access to them limited when they are found in everyday life? Thus, different countries and societies will deem different contents to be unsuitable. So, the long and short of this is ‘Whose point of view are we talking about?’ What exacerbates this issue is that censorship has often been used to impose conformity on a collective by totalitarian regimes. Relating to the issue of content is that of control (or to put it differently, who draws the line?). Not only are we speaking of whose point of view should carry the day but also who has the right to control the access to materials. The people, the regulators (who are actually put in place by the people in most nations of our world) or the ‘industry’? The third issue relates to the whole matter of efficacy. Can censorship really work? Are there not ways to circumvent the attention of the regulators? This has been exacerbated by the advent of the internet. Is it possible for any society fully to screen the contents of the internet? Finally, the fourth major issue is that of stagnation. Is censorship the way forward for a mature society? Will not the curtailing of information-flow retard the growth of a culture or a society? Should not the well-educated and well-informed individual be trusted upon to decide? If this person could not be trusted to make the right decision, what right have we to believe that the regulators are in a better position to make such decisions? If only the legislators are regarded as being in the best position to make such decisions, will it not give rise to a nanny state which will not be free from its mother’s apron strings to compete with the big boys out there? Any decision made on whether to censor or not to censor will have to take into account the four thorny issues explained above. A good case study of how these factors are at work is Singapore’s approach to censorship in the age of the internet.

Censorship and the information age: Singapore as a case study

Singapore prides itself as an intelligent island with a workforce that adapts quickly to changing market and economic conditions. This is achieved by ensuring that its citizens are well-educated and its society well-ordered by a clean government. These two objectives often pull in opposite directions. However, the approaches adopted by the legislators of Singapore in dealing with these diametrically opposed forces can set a precedent for other countries with a strict moral ethos to cope with progress and conservatism.

To perform well in the new economy, information flow must not be hindered.⁵ To open the floodgates of information will result in a deluge of materials affirmative of and inimical to Singapore's conservative moral ethos. Due to the innumerable web-sites available in the world-wide web, it is humanly impossible to screen these all the time and prevent the citizens from gaining access to them. Banning of publications, which was once a very effective tool, becomes quite lame now. To shut the floodgates of information will mean that Singapore will be at a great disadvantage to compete globally. What could the way forward be?

As I understand it, the government of Singapore adopts the following strategy through the Ministry of Information and the Arts (MITA) and its arm, the Singapore Broadcasting Authority (SBA). MITA's vision statement sounds out straightaway the issues it is confronted with:

To develop Singapore as a global city of information and the arts, while enhancing our Singapore identity and multicultural heritage.

There is an apparent paradox in the statement and this may be indicative of the kind of struggles the legislators go through. To achieve the vision of the first clause must mean that censorship could hardly be used as there are different standards of decency in our globe. Information and arts are churned and produced presupposing these standards. Can a global city of information and the arts exclude nudity in the arts⁶ and political-sensitive information? In case the centrifugal force of globalisation tears apart what moral code Singapore's society once stood for, the next clause seeks to check this. But the ambiguous aspect of this clause will revolve around the term 'Singapore identity'. What is this and is this in transition? Whatever the hidden struggles may be, the vision statement indicates that the legislators wish to help Singapore progress further by riding on the new economy, with information technology featuring large in it, and preserving its conservative moral ethos. How is this done?

⁵ Cf. the interesting case referred to by Dr Ang where, because satellite dishes were banned even for financial institutions, many in Singapore suffered great financial losses as they learnt of the Gulf War 30 seconds later than their competitors who had access to the most current news (in this case, the CNN). This has caused the Government to lift the ban for financial institutions and to provide cable services. See P.H. Ang, 'Information Highways — Policy and Regulation: the Singapore Experience', in V. Iyer (ed.), *Media Regulations for the New Times*, Singapore: Asian Media Information and Communication Centre, 1999, pp. 105-6.

⁶ What the arts are is a most tantalising question. Is the nudity found in an opera such as *The Fiery Angel* any less provocative or questionable than that found in *Playboy*?

The one strategy adopted, it seems to me, is that of retaining governmental leverage even if access is allowed to different forms of media which are potentially inimical to the provisions of the Films Act and the Undesirable Publications Act. Take for example the following instance. SBA expressly states in its website, in answer to a frequently-asked question, that it does not censor websites. Internet service providers (ISPs) are required only to block access to 100 sites which are deemed to be high-impact pornographic sites. SBA also states explicitly that it does not monitor users' access to websites and that the 'mere act of visiting a site' is not an offence. Moreover, it also states that 'users can access any material on the Internet in the privacy of their own home'.⁷ However, the paragraph pertaining to this matter in the Undesirable Publication Acts has not been removed. A minimum of \$2,000 fine (or an imprisonment) awaits anyone possessing prohibited publications or part of it (such as nude pictures).⁸ The act of visiting a website which contains pornographic material will inadvertently result in its being downloaded as cache files on the hard disk. Does this constitute possession or not? If it does, what sense will it make of SBA's reply? But legislation still provides the Government of Singapore the authority to act against anyone who possesses pornographic materials in whatever form or media. Logic may perhaps dictate that some clauses of the relevant Acts be changed but this is not forthcoming. Thus it can be seen that while the Government of Singapore seeks to keep with the times and exploits new technology for economic gains, it does not wish to lose leverage over ambiguous situations. It is also contented simply to leave things ambiguous as long as it has the leverage to act.

Being confronted with the impotence of the ban, SBA also adopts the strategy of targeting broadcasters, purveyors and distributors — not the users — and encouraging self-regulation by the industry. Thus companies which adhered to the conservative ethos will keep an eye on those which are not in line to ensure that the offenders do not make huge profits at their expense as undesirable materials can ring in the cash. In this way, the need for the Government to deploy its officers to monitor what the citizens are doing will be lessened.

In addition to the above, SBA encourages participation from the community in the regulation of media standards. Parental supervision is greatly encouraged. For some parents, they would feel as though they were

⁷ http://www.sba.gov.sg/work/sba_hom.../

⁸ Paragraph 6 (2).

lost at sea, being entrusted with this kind of responsibility. At the same time, prominent citizens, such as academicians, educators, people of high social standing are drawn in from different segments of society to provide input and advice. Thus, any punitive or regulatory action taken against offenders will not be perceived as high-handed or stemming simply from a Government which has lost touch with the times. So, SBA's approach is regularly fine-tuned through consultation with these people.

The defining of 100 high-impact pornographic sites serves actually to make a statement that as the information floodgates are opened, there must not be loosening of morals. It is only making a statement because many of the high impact pornographic sites, such as Playboy, contain materials which can be considered kid's stuff when compared to the hardcore sex pictures which could be found in many sites which are not blocked. It seems to me what these 100 sites are are not really important. What is important is that there are sites which are banned. In this regard, the act of limiting access to these 100 sites also serves to assure concerned parents that SBA will stand with them in their fight to prevent their children from being corrupted by pornography.

The struggles of the legislators in Singapore should lead to much reflection on the part of the Church. Christians in Singapore can stand four-square with the Government in its fight against morally debilitating forces. But they, at the same time, also wish to draw on the technological advances in their witness for the Gospel and their desire to live as God's people in a world that is rapidly changing. Limiting access to inimical materials appears lame in the digital age but the church's belief in the doctrine of human depravity will mean that sinful forces are still at work. What strategies could it adopt to face these problems?

Some biblical perspectives

The Christian faith actually has in itself the measures and strategies for dealing with the problems mentioned above. A high moral standing can be obtained without the concomitant of being insular. Much can be written on this but the constraint of space dictates that I shall present the pertinent points succinctly.

A proper Christian response should draw upon the fundamental doctrines Christianity stands for. Monotheism and election were the defining doctrines of the faith of Israel and these twin pillars were not left behind by the NT church. They define the community of faith in both the

OT and NT periods. How do they provide resources to Christians facing the issues outlined earlier?

Deuteronomy 6:4-5 contains the famous passage which is known as the Shema to Jews. The Shema may also be understood as their credal statement and it captures, in a nutshell, the twin pillars mentioned earlier. In this statement, the fundamental *belief* of the community is spelled out: one God. The fundamental *praxis* of this belief is also spelled out: love this one God. The people of God have been specially and graciously chosen and they show their election through the confession and practice of the Shema. Through the authentic confessing and adherence to the Shema, Israel would be prevented from being sucked into the ethos of the surrounding pagan nations.

The Shema features also largely in the teaching of the NT although this is seldom noted by many Christians today. Indeed, the two greatest commandments cited by our Lord were prefaced by the words of the Shema (Mark 12:29-31), indicating how important this confession was for the shaping of the identity of God's people. This is because it captures in a nutshell the primary belief and primary praxis. Even if the second greatest commandment is about loving our neighbours, it must still be insisted that it is actually an explication and concretising of the greatest, which is that of loving God. Later, Paul would use the same basis for dealing with the thorny problem of food offered to idols (1 Corinthians 8). The difference for Paul is just this: God has become much more clearly known in Christ Jesus our Lord.

This apparently abstract theological idea actually contains in itself many practical pointers. Let me elaborate on this. There is only one God and yet not everyone in the world believes in this one God nor subject themselves to him. Why is the case? Here, biblical anthropology becomes important. Humans are sinful and consequently, they choose not to follow this one God. Thus, a society without regulations cannot work. It will inexorably break down. Having regulations put a check on sinful praxis but they do not solve the problem at heart. But this one God has not left the world to stew in its own sinful juices but in his grace he has come to rescue it. This is none other than the notion of redemption and in this redemptive act, a community of the people of God is created. This community demonstrates itself to be elect through its beliefs and praxis which have been graciously given by God. It ensures its continuity through the inculcation of such beliefs and praxis through the handing on of its story and creed in different settings and through different ways to subsequent

generations (Deut 6:6-9). What strikes us moderns, when reading Deut 6:6-9, is the primacy given to parental responsibility in the inculcation of such a creed. Sadly in our times, we leave the shaping of our children's values to governments, their peers and, the worst of all, Hollywood. In a time where banning is almost impossible, the solution to tackling the onslaught of corrupting influences which infiltrate the homes must be the building up of a community which is clear about its identity, the nature of reality, the *telos* of this world and the One to whom all this is to be in subjection. The building up of this community is facilitated by the continuity provided by parents through the inculcation of values which would strengthen and nurture. Such strengthening and nurturing will stand a Christian in good stead not only to face the world but also to testify to the redemption which is found in Christ Jesus. This community will then become salt to the world, to preserve that which is good in it and to add flavour to life in it. It will also become light to illuminate and point to the God who reconciles and grants true life.

There are other important aspects to the Shema which makes the holding on to it with all seriousness and truthfulness a bastion against corrupting forces, something which many governments could not quite succeed in achieving. Monotheism speaks of the belief in the one true God who alone is the Creator and Lord of history. Consequently, Christianity stands against certain forms of dualisms or gnosticisms which regard creation as evil. This will save us from certain contradictions and from throwing the baby out with the dirty bath-water. The human body as God's wonderful creation is a cause for celebration. The sight of it is nothing wrong in itself. What will be wrong is the abuse of it or the use of such pictures to titillate and entice the weak into sinful deeds. Thinking about such issues leads me inexorably to reflect on a haunting opera of Wagner: *Tannhäuser*. In that opera, the protagonist *Tannhäuser* is torn between *Venus* and *Elizabeth*. *Venus* represents erotic love which excites and attracts but it gives him guilt. *Elizabeth* represents pure spiritual love but it offers no joy and excitement. The protagonist commits suicide at the end for he could not bear the tension. I think many a Christian is close to being torn apart by such forces. Knowing that there is one God who has given us the charisma of sex helps us to combine what *Tannhäuser* could not. Adopting a form of dualism which regards some creatureliness of humanity as sinful has led some circles in the church to look askance at sexual joys, or perhaps, any form of joy. On the other hand, if sex or happiness is the be all and end all, paganism or materialism will ensue. Monotheism, then, forms a bastion against these two debilitating forces. Thus, in issues relating to nudity and depiction of sex and violence, Christianity will be in

a position to pinpoint what is wrong without denying humanity's 'createdness'.

The doctrine of election (as it is understood in Scriptures) will mean that Christians are the chosen people of God and it is their responsibility to show the world the way of being in the world which is in harmony with the doctrine of monotheism. Through so doing, it will invite others to join in through the acceptance of the gracious salvific call of Jesus Christ our Lord. This is done not arrogantly as it knows it is chosen by grace but it should be done courageously and confidently because it is chosen by the one true God! So our values are linked to the idea that there is only one God and this God is Creator and Lord. As his creation, we acknowledge the gifts of the Creator. As his subjects, we use such gifts properly to his glory and speak against their abuse. In so doing, we love this God with all our minds, all our strengths, and all our souls, and not to increase our lobbying power in the world.

Developing a worldview and identity which draws fundamentally upon the twin pillars of monotheism and election seriously will give our children and those under our care a holistic view of dealing with issues relating to media and censorship, and the debilitating forces that tired censorship tries very hard to prevent. In this task, the expertise of the elders of the community and the parents are called upon to shore up, to shape and to hand on the beliefs and praxis which lead to and stem from eternal life.

The adumbration above has attempted tentatively to map out a Christian response to some pertinent issues of media and censorship. It may not have hit the target but the direction in which this literary arrow has flown would indicate, I hope, at least where the target is. It certainly was shot to show why the Gospel continues to be so utterly relevant to such issues and why in it lies the power that governments want to tackle such thorny issues and transform society.

Dr Tan Kim Huat
Dean of Post Graduate Studies,
Trinity Theological College