

Dunphy Article The Book That Started It All

by John J Dunphy

As the owner of a secondhand book shop, I am constantly receiving donations of used books. Some of these books are immediately consigned to the shop's shelves, while others that deal with topics of interest to me are first perused before being offered for sale to the public. A book recently brought to me by an old friend decidedly fell into that latter category.

The book in question is *Book Burning* by Cal Thomas, published in 1983. Considering that Thomas was one of the luminaries of the Christian Right, I initially assumed that it was a how-to manual on the fine art of destroying tomes not favored by the Christian Right, complete with information regarding which lighter fluid works best.

A skimming of *Book Burning*, however, proved it to be nothing of the kind. The book burners in Thomas's work were not Christians going about the work of the Lord but - surprise, surprise! - liberals, feminists and those insidious secular humanists who gave conservative Christians even less respect than Rodney Dangerfield received on his worst days. According to Thomas, these anti-Christians maintained a stranglehold in education and the mass media, while their special interest groups assault traditional American values. Cal was horrified that 86 per cent of what he termed "the media elite" never or seldom attend religious services, while "civil liberties zealots" allowed "smut peddlers" to flourish and prevented school children from performing nativity plays.

And don't even get Cal started on feminists. Not only were they writing children's books that challenge traditional gender roles, but they were working to turn children against their own parents if mommy and daddy weren't adhering to the feminist party line!

I wanted to see what Thomas had to say about the effect of the forces of darkness on public education. And there it was - on the second page of the chapter on public education, no less. Most humanists probably know what I mean by "it." But for those of you who are new to our movement, suffice to say that "it" refers to a passage from my essay "A Religion For A New Age," which was published in *The Humanist* magazine's January-February 1983 issue. This passage, quoted by Thomas and several thousand other Christian Rightists over the years, including the late Ronald Reagan, runs:

"I am convinced that the battle for humankind's future must be waged and won in the public school classroom by teachers who correctly perceive their role as the proselytizers of a new faith: a religion of humanity that recognizes and respects the spark of what theologians call divinity in every human being. These teachers must embody the same selfless dedication as the most rabid fundamentalist preachers, for they will be ministers of another sort, utilizing a classroom instead of a pulpit to convey humanist values in whatever subject they teach, regardless of the educational level - preschool daycare or large state university. The classroom must and will become an arena of conflict between the old and the new - the rotting corpse of Christianity, together with all its adjacent evils and misery, and the new faith of humanism, resplendent with its promise of a world in which the never-realized Christian ideal of 'love thy neighbor' will finally be achieved.

"Then perhaps we will be able to say with Tom Paine that 'the world is my country, all [hu]mankind are my brethren, and to do good is my religion.' It will undoubtedly be a long, arduous struggle replete with much sorrow and many tears, but humanism will emerge triumphant. It must if the family of humankind is to survive."

Now, I'll readily admit that reading my own words in a hostile publication was not a new experience. Through the years, I've read countless denunciations of my essay that incorporate those two paragraphs from "A Religion For A New Age." But running across Thomas's book reminded me of a feat that had slipped my mind during the past two decades.

Dunphy, Thomas bellowed in *Book Burning*, possessed the "temerity" to send a copy of his essay to none other than Jerry Falwell, along with a cover letter that touted his essay as a work that "exposes the Bible as the vicious, ill-conceived conglomeration of fiction and fantasy that it is." And, by golly, Thomas was right! I indeed had mailed Jerry Falwell, the head honcho of the Moral Majority, who was then at the zenith of his power in the Christian Right, a copy of my article - autographed, no less. Man, I had guts in those days!

But reading *Book Burning* was more than just a trip down memory lane for this particular humanist activist. It reacquainted me with a valuable historical document that explains how white, evangelical Christian conservatives became today's dominant political force in the United States.

After presumably convincing his Christian readers that they are being victimized by a godless minority, Thomas advised them to register to vote and join the Moral Majority and other national Christian Right organizations. They were also encouraged to join local organizations, especially those working to ban abortion. Seek out and unite with other Christians who are appalled by America's moral decline, he ordered.

It should be painfully obvious to humanists and other liberals that readers of *Book Burning* took Thomas's injunctions to heart. Our nation now has a chief executive who proclaims that Jesus Christ is his favorite philosopher.

Thomas argued in 1983 that conservative Christians should organize and take over the country - which, in a very real sense, is precisely what happened. Now, it's time for progressives to organize and take it back. I don't care to live in a nation in which Genesis will someday be uniformly taught as "creation science," abortion is criminalized, little girls are socialized for careers as housekeepers and baby machines, and homosexuality is again stigmatized as a perversion and mental illness. I don't want an America in which the cross replaces the flag as the national symbol and the Bible becomes the law of the land.

Book Burning convinced Christian conservatives to become activists and change the political and social landscape of the United States. A reading of this same book should convince secularists and liberal theists that we can liberate our nation from the stranglehold of the Christian Right. All it takes is organization, dedication, and a lot of hard work. If they can do it, we can do it.