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Review of Robin Vose, *The Index of Prohibited Books: Four Centuries of Struggle Over Word and Image for the Greater Glory of God*

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Vose, Robin. *The Index of Prohibited Books: Four Centuries of Struggle Over Word and Image for the Greater Glory of God*. London, UK: Reaktion Books, 2022. 296 pp. + 35 ill.

Robin Vose has provided readers with a highly accessible overview of the origins, evolution, and eventual extinction of the Index of Prohibited Books. However, this is not a work solely attentive to Indexes emanating from Rome. One of the strengths of the work is that it grapples with how censorship efforts and priorities varied by location, for instance in Spain and Portugal, as well as over time. Vose's work is based on the premise that the Index was a "technology of censorship, designed to achieve a certain goal in a specific context" but that, "like all tools, it maintained certain basic characteristics while also being modified over time to better serve its purpose(s)" (7). This book artfully manages the delicate balance between offering academics a timely reassessment of the Index while also remaining engaging for a broader reading audience.

An incisive Introduction immediately alerts the reader that, although focused on a historical phenomenon, this book is engaged in modern debates about censorship, challenging readers to consider how it continues today. Part I of the work includes, for the most part, chronological studies of particular moments in the Index's history. Chapter 1, "Censorship Before the Index," lays out early efforts at control, although these were never "fully regularized or institutionalized" (44), in a period when manuscripts remained rare and expensive. Chapter 2, "Inventing the Index" traces how the combined innovations of Martin Luther's ideas and the printing press forced the Catholic Church toward its own innovation, standardizing efforts at censorship. However, this in no way occurred the same way, or at the same time, throughout Europe, and the chapter is attentive to how this process was sporadic, contested, and varied. Once created, "Expanding the Index," as discussed in Chapter 3, was the natural next step as printing presses across Europe began releasing books at an unprecedented rate. Nonetheless, the process of agreeing upon "How to Ban a Book," analyzed in Chapter 4, rarely included consensus amongst censors within a single jurisdiction, much less across jurisdictions. Vose dodges the morass of theological niceties that could bog down such a chapter and instead centers the readers' focus on how particular individuals and contexts affected the reception and consideration of a book by censors. However, while these reviews could be "shoddy, tardy or inconsistent" these men's efforts were "neither unthinkingly intolerant nor monolithically unchangeable" (120).

The chapters in Part II each focus on designated themes. Chapter 5 addresses "Censored Scriptures," such as illicit Bible editions and commentaries. It also includes efforts to censure sacred texts of other faiths, specifically Judaism and Islam, and then later those of Indigenous peoples encountered amidst colonial

expansion. The “Censored Magic and Science” of Chapter 6 is perhaps what first comes to readers’ minds when thinking of the Index of Prohibited Books. However, Vose argues that prohibitions on such writings were never as complete or extensive as often assumed and that the ebbs and flows of repression speak more to the contexts than the contents of the works censored. While, undeniably, “serious damage was done to the history of human thought” in this process, the author points out that the Church was “hostile neither to ‘scientific’ nor to ‘magical’ books as an undifferentiated mass” (178). Too often overlooked when considering the Index, “Censored Sex, Faith and the Arts” is the topic of Chapter 7. Here, Vose regales the reader with fascinating examples of efforts to control literature, art, and music but the most striking constant is the inconsistency and seemingly random efforts of censors grappling with cultural output that far exceeded their ability to review, access, and sometimes even understand. “Censorship and Modernity” collide in Chapter 8 and many readers will be shocked to learn that although severely restricted in its efforts and reach, the Index of Prohibited Books, in the form of a ‘universal’ papal Index, would continue to limp along until 1966. Again, the censors’ efforts and inclusions retained a haphazard feel, including socialists and anarchists on one hand, and fascists and Nazis on the other, while Charles Darwin and his argument for evolution was never prohibited. This chapter is a shocking reminder that the Index of Prohibited Books was not merely an early modern phenomenon but also lurked into the modern era.

The Conclusion returns the reader to the conundrum of censorship in the modern day. While almost no one advocates for the sort of authoritarian control the Index aspired to, more subtle forms still creep into our daily lives and many of us prefer it that way, curtailing the reach of fake news, hate speech, bogus science, and certain types of pornography. More subtly, Vose points out the self-censorship within academic disciplines created by peer review and the *de facto* censorship that occurs based on what sorts of research and art receive funding. These parallels are uncomfortable but important to grapple with and the author does an excellent job challenging his reader to do so.

This work was undertaken “in hopes of reaching beyond the narrow confines of a specialized academic readership” (288) and Vose has offered an excellent example of how a topic that, in other hands, could be rather stodgy, can instead be written in an engaging, and at times even entertaining, way. To accomplish this, endnotes have been used sparingly though interested readers can consult a “Further Reading” section. However, this is not to say that academics don’t have much to learn from this work (this reviewer learned a lot!). Vose’s study provides excellent examples of how the Index’s fundamental goals were, from its inception, impossible to achieve and that indeed this effort at discipline and control was plagued by “inquisitorial inefficiency and misplaced priorities” resulting in censorship that was largely “episodic, incoherent, accidental and sometimes

contradictory” (235). However, the men conducting this work, far from bumbling zealots (though those could appear occasionally), were reacting to the very real and changing circumstances—political, social, and cultural—that spanned the 400-year history of the Index. Vose’s book reminds its readers that dismissing the work and effort of censors and Indexes too quickly will surely only leave us unprepared to tackle the continuing challenges and threats that censorship poses in our own day.

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