

DON'T MISS 'The DA VINCI CODE'

Here we go again. Another blatant attempt by Church and State to stifle the freedom of expression has occurred recently with the banning of the film *Aksharaya* under pressure from the Sinhala cultural nationalists and the banning of the 'The da Vinci Code' after protests by the Catholic Bishop's Conference. In fact the ban on this film has been ordered without the usual procedure of screening by the Public Performances Board. In the past fundamentalists of all religions in Sri Lanka have agitated to get books and films they find 'offensive' banned. After some Muslims in Sri Lanka protested against Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* and Taslima Nasreen's *Lajja*, these books were banned. We also had the banning of *Buddhism Betrayed?* by S.J. Tambiah, which led to a strong protest by 50 Sri Lankan intellectuals. All religious leaders and the more bigoted of their following seem to thrive on the banning of books and films. The result is immense publicity for the protests or bans. The film 'The da Vinci Code' is No.1 at the box-office in the USA today!

It is not really surprising that in Western Europe, the pews in churches are empty and that nuns and priests have to be recruited from Africa and Asia. This is because the Catholic Church is stuck in the Middle Ages, where burning heretics at the stake, and torture were part of the infamous Inquisition. There was even a list of 'Prohibited Books' which Catholics could not read. This has been abolished but the Church yet intervenes to ban films. Today the Catholic Church condemns reproductive rights, divorce and gay rights and it has been being quick off the mark to organize demonstrations against films on the life of Christ.

All this reminds us that father Tissa Balasuriya, OMI was excommunicated (but later taken back) for depicting Mary, the mother of Jesus as a liberated woman. His liberation theology and support for women priests annoyed the Vatican.

In 1997 Cat's Eye took a strong stand on social reform and religion. It said "Many of us who are secular in outlook, and believe that religion is a personal matter, are not surprised that a medieval, feudal and patriarchal institution like the Roman Catholic Church not only still fights rearguard battles on issues of divorce, abortion and female ordination but also excommunicates those who differ. So what happened to human rights, to freedom of choice, to freedom of expression, won after long battles against the feudal regimes of Church and State in the late 18th century, as well as the struggles for democracy of the following century?"

The Catholic Church which persecuted Galileo but has now regretted this, has yet to come to terms with the European philosophers of the Enlightenment and the call for liberty, equality and fraternity _ which now includes freedom of expression and gender equity. In the year 2006, we don't need the Church or State to tell us which book to read and which film to see.

Fortunately the media has not towed the official line. The Free Media Movement has deplored the ban.

An editorial (*Daily Mirror* 29 May 2006) entitled "Adopt an Enlightened Approach" notes that even in the USA and Indonesia, the film has not been banned. What is more it seems that no European or Christian country has banned the film. However the book has sold millions all over the world and has been on sale in Sri Lanka. It will no doubt be on cable TV and available on DVD soon. It will be a 'hot number' since banning books and films will only increase their popularity. Don't Miss "The da Vinci Code!"

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