

A Conflict between Religious Extremism and Intellectual Freedom at Ground Zero

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ABSTRACT

Religious extremism, mostly in the form of Christian Nationalism, is the catalyst fueling the book banning engine currently steamrolling across school and public libraries in America. In March of 2023 the Autauga-Prattville Public Library (APPL) of Autauga County, Alabama became Ground Zero in a book banning conflict that eventually bled into a statewide war fought primarily in school and public library boards, city council and county commissions, the state library board, some churches, and in every branch of the government. The fight continues to this day, and librarians who were on the frontlines were soon joined by local grassroots non-profits against the hate groups perpetrating the waves of book bans across Alabama. This article frequently sources a local journalist from the *Alabama Political Reporter* (APR), amongst other new sites and organizations, and is my personal account of what happened as I was employed there at that time. The arguments either for or against book bans are in reference to many books published either by or for BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ people and describe the length to which religious extremists will deem anything related to these marginalized communities as “inappropriate.”

Exposing the Catalyst for Book Banning in Alabama

Religious extremism is sending its acolytes into an ideological war against public and school libraries across the United States through book banning and censorship. Religious extremists, especially Christian Nationalists, have focused their attention on books written for children and young adults by or about LGBTQIA+ people or people of color. Christian Nationalism is comparable to an army of hate groups popping up every year with anti-diversity agendas and far-right extremists using school and library boards as their personal battlegrounds and brandishing the time-honored phrase “For the Children!” as though they are the ones with children’s best interests in mind. In areas like the uber-conservative South, this agenda is all too easy to implement. Alabama groups like Clean Up Alabama (CUA), The Heritage Foundation, 1819 News, Moms for Liberty, and Eagle Forum communicate easily with the state’s majority Republican leaders to advance their agendas into law.

How is it that a group of people who use a historical, religious text that purports the love for all humankind, could be some of the worst offenders of that declaration? According to Sam Harris' book, *Letter to a Christian Nation*:

“Thousands of people have written to tell me that I am wrong not to believe in God. The most hostile of these communications have come from Christians. This is ironic, as Christians generally imagine that no faith imparts the virtues of love and forgiveness more effectively than their own. The truth is that many who claim to be transformed by Christ's love are deeply, even murderously, intolerant of criticism. While we may want to ascribe this to human nature, it is clear that such hatred draws considerable support from the Bible. How do I know this? The most disturbed of my correspondents always cite chapter and verse” (Harris, 2006).

Harris' paradox is difficult to accept; however, there is historical precedent of people using the God of the Bible to justify both great deeds and base atrocities. This is truer today because the rate of freedom distributed to many countries has never been higher across the globe in all of human history. We Christians, or those of other faiths who question this use the Bible as a weapon may recall what history has taught us about the actions and behaviors of these so-called Christians. We must remember that those who espouse Christianity, but do not actually follow its key teachings, may belong to fringe groups resembling Christian Nationalists. One of their current vendettas is the books on our library shelves, which are being portrayed by these extremists as paper nuclear bombs instead of the troves of intellectual pursuit that they are.

On the other hand, those locals who adhere to religious and intellectual freedom are rising up and combating this phenomenon through grassroot activist organizations like Read Freely Alabama (RFA) and Prattville Pride. They are then supported by nonprofits and news sites like EveryLibrary, moveon.org, Book Riot, the American Library Association (ALA), the American Booksellers Association (ABA), the Freedom to Read Foundation, Democracy Forward, We Need Diverse Books, Penguin Random House, and PEN America, just to name a few. Some of these activist groups receive support from their respective state library associations, which in RFA's instance is the Alabama Library Association (ALLA). ALLA's mission is to uphold the intellectual freedom upon which school and public libraries stand. It, therefore, advocates for those rights and protections already defined by our national and state constitutions. These rights include First Amendment rights for all people, the rights of parents to parent their own children, and the rights of individuals to make their own decisions except in cases of crime. ALLA also takes into consideration that public and school libraries are bastions of diverse concepts, and that they institutionally fall under the umbrella of the separation of church and state. Most strikingly, groups like RFA strive to protect the librarians and educators themselves, who are currently being vilified, the likes of which have not been seen since War World II.

Example of Religious Extremism in Action, Explained Through Personal Experience

In March of 2023 a homeschool mom checked out a board book about pronouns for her son's English lesson. She paid attention to the title of the book, *The Pronoun Book* by Chris

Ayala-Kronos, but not its cover, which illustrated the book's theme. To be fair to the mom, the cataloger at the time had mistakenly processed the book with the incorrect Dewey Decimal call number, classifying its subject matter as grammar, instead of correctly classifying it under gender studies. Her ire at the discovery led her to her favorite Facebook page for local homeschool moms, and through that channel she instigated a hate group. Their eventual name signifies their overall plan: to "Clean Up Alabama." Their mission: to punish the library for having such books on the shelves, or have it defunded. They started petitions on change.org to have the book and anything similar removed (it was eventually taken down because it had attracted the notice of the author himself, Chris Ayala-Kronos, who accused change.org of copyright infringement). They began to attend the library board, city council, and county commission meetings over the next few weeks to read excerpts from books that were either taken entirely out of context or from books that were not even in the library. They quoted the Bible throughout their speeches, equating their cause to righteousness. They espoused hateful words about the LGBTQIA+ community, falsely comparing books about this community to "sex books" or "porn in the children's room." The most striking example of this was the use of the graphic memoir *Gender Queer* by Maia Kobabe, which is not owned by the Autauga-Prattville Public Library.

When their attempts to defund the library failed during a city council meeting in September of that year (Holmes, 4 September 2023), the group met with the chairman of the Alabama GOP, who was poised to become one of the next board members for the Alabama Public Library Service (APLS) under Governor Ivey's directives to cleanse the state's libraries of books about diversity (Holmes, 17 October 2023). The next plan of attack was to use the library as a scapegoat by passing highly discriminatory policies so that the APLS could reciprocate for their own push to pass policy changes tying censorship to funding (Holmes, 4 April 2024). To accomplish this, the city council and county commission needed to replace the current board with as many acolytes as possible to the cause of religious extremism. This was accomplished throughout the winter of 2023-2024 when the county commission ignored the advice of a retiring board member, and selected a city councilperson's family member. When the rest of the board resigned in protest, a wave of CUA members were subsequently voted in by the county commission. An atmosphere of anxiety descended upon the librarians working at my library.

It all exploded soon after, when this newly Clean Up Alabama-stacked library board passed policies banning books about "sexual identity and gender studies" for patrons under the age of eighteen in February 2024 (Chapoco, 2024). One month later, the board met at city hall to fire the library director, who had taken the post just eight months prior, after the previous director resigned due to attacks by patrons over this issue. These attacks led to serious health complications and a desire to spend more time with her family. After firing the new director, the new board banned him from entering the library again and told library employees that they were going to pursue ethics complaints against him. In protest, my fellow coworkers and I closed the library early and stood in a united front against the library board members, who besieged us from the other side of the circulation desk like a Wild West standoff. Consequently, we were fired too (Holmes, 15 March 2024).

Many of the remaining staff resigned over the next couple of days in protest. The library was swiftly taken over by Clean Up Alabama volunteers. The police were called because the staff members were accused of allegedly "stealing library property and causing damage to the building." Locksmiths changed the library locks in the middle of the night. One employee who stayed was swiftly appointed interim director and, in her complicity, did not hesitate to allow the new board members to fully implement all their desired policy changes (Jensen, 2024). Over the next several weeks this resulted in a reduction of the library's hours, the termination and change

of long-standing programs, the disappearance of LGBTQIA+ youth and sexual health books, the end of purchasing new books and the Interlibrary Loan program.

From the beginning, public focus had been directed toward young adult and children's books, but that focus widened to include attacks on all books containing sexual content, sexual orientation, and gender identity in general, regardless of target age.

One former board member of the Autauga County library system, who is an avid supporter of libraries and a local author, resigned her position after only one month of service. Concerned by the discriminatory policies that were voted on without her knowledge or participation, she requested that books authored by her be pulled from the library. The policies were purposefully vague when it came to gender identity references and to the appropriate age for readership. The policy was put into place with the intent of removing all books containing references to gender identity, even ones placed in the adult section. This was done because extremists feared that children might wander into the adult section where some books and graphic novels depict sexual scenes within the context of the story (Holmes, 9 February 2024).

The author's books are characterized as steamy, supernatural romances meant for adults. Therefore, her books were correctly cataloged in the adult fiction section of the library. Many people online vilified her as a pornographer because she wrote books of a sexual nature for an adult audience. Those who vilified her work acted as if we still live in a prude police state where sex is taboo and practically outlawed, and as though the Supreme Court had not already resolved the definition of obscenity in 1973 with the passing of the *Miller* test.

When scrutinized, many locals in the area brought up the critique that if the purpose of censoring or banning books is simply to "protect children," why would removing adult books be relevant. Claiming that a child would be irreparably damaged by being exposed to a book that is beyond their reading level is fallacious and opinion based only. The policies of most libraries in the country specifically direct parents to supervise their own children in library spaces, which is a clear indication that parents should be responsible for what their children read.

In this regard, do we treat young children the same developmentally as teenagers just because they both are under the heading of "minors," and, therefore, authors should write books for teenagers the same way they would for small children? All such questions are at the foundation of the fight against book bans and censorship in our public and school libraries, which should never have begun in the first place, thanks to the pursuit of intellectual freedom and the importance of diversity and secularism in public spaces.

Regarding book challenges, school and public libraries across the U. S. have already instituted policies for patrons to submit material reconsideration requests. Librarians are the best proponents of protecting this policy, since they understand a patron has that right. There are times when a patron may notice a mistake about the processing of a book that went unnoticed by a librarian. This happened to me while I was the cataloger during the book challenges. A patron emailed me to tell me that I had erroneously put a science fiction book in the young adult fiction section when publishers were classifying it as the author's debut, adult, science fiction book. She was right, and I swiftly made the change and thanked her for her fastidiousness. It was all down to my human error and is just one of the many reasons why librarians protect patrons' rights to submit material reconsideration requests in their local library within reason.

In an act to maintain modern librarianship as well as a suitable compromise to the few legitimate concerns about inappropriate books in the young adult section, my former coworkers and I created a New Adult Section in the library; a relatively new category for publishers and nationally recognized as a legitimate category for fiction by Goodreads, Reedsy, and Kirkus Reviews. This new category captures stories about young adults between the age of 18 and 25

who are beginning their transition into adulthood. This includes stories about starting college, a career, military service, etc. Many books from the adult and young adult sections were then transferred to the new adult section at our library.

Material Reconsideration forms and policies exist for patrons who want to express their rights in regard to books they wish to have investigated. However, in reference to Mary Jo Godwin's quote in the *Wilson Library Bulletin*, "a really good library should have something in it to offend everyone." Whether that be books, movies, programs, displays, or whatever, libraries have diverse collections that represent the general population in order to remain a sanctuary of public space. When a library begins removing books according to the whims of the religiously, socially, and politically intolerant, it no longer is a sanctuary, but a cult.

In the *Journal of Intellectual Freedom & Privacy* (2019), James LaRue, former director of the ALA Office of Intellectual Freedom and author of *On Censorship: A Public Librarian Examines Cancel Culture in the US*, wrote in contrast to the famous quote by Ms. Godwin that

"a really good library has something in it to *support* everyone (assuming that the intent is not to commit a crime). You're a Christian homeschooler? Let us show you how we can provide an alternative to a \$1,000 a year paid curriculum. You're a lesbian mom looking for books to show families like yours to your kids? Here's our small but growing collection. Can you recommend other titles? In my formal responses to challenges, I did my best to find that balance. The sub-text: Libraries demonstrate their value not through the suppression of resources, but through their provision. Our mission was to add useful information, not hide what some people found disagreeable or uncomfortable."

The Adoption of State Administration Code Changes

In February of 2024, the board of the Alabama Public Library Service announced their intention to accept public comments, per the law, for the proposed administrative code changes as requested by Governor Ivey shortly after she removed board member Virginia Doyle, when Ms. Doyle "questioned threats to rip funding away from the state agency over matters she said the board has no authority to address" (Holmes, 22 November 2023). In response, the *Alabama Reflector* reported "the governor wrote that state funding for local libraries should be based on the existence of policies related to the location and relocation of materials inappropriate for children, as well as advance approval for displaying, recommending or otherwise actively promoting books by staff" (Stephenson, 2023). Hundreds of letters were sent from concerned Alabama citizens and in April, over a hundred people signed up to speak in front of the APLS board either to express their support for or opposition to Governor Ivey's administrative code changes. As can be imagined, those who spoke in support for the changes were in the minority and did so using aggressive language and several out-of-context references to the Bible while those in opposition used research and personal experiences (Holmes, 1 May 2024).

With the support of at least three of the board members, who allegedly adhered to religious extremist views towards diversity and inclusion within libraries (Holmes, 24 June 2024), the changes were adopted by the board in May with few amendments. All of this was supposedly done in the name of continued funding, according to one board member, ALGOP Chairman John Wahl. According to the *APR*, "When [Dr. Nancy] Pack asked [Chairman John]

Wahl whether that meant [House Education Budget Chair Danny] Garrett (R-Trussville) is looking to cut funding, Wahl said nothing was final right now and that conversations are still being had among lawmakers” (Holmes, 22 March 2024). This is in reference to the Alabama legislature discussing possible bills that would tie funding for the APLS and in proxy the public libraries within the state to policies that would essentially ban books deemed “sexually inappropriate,” a term that no book banner in power will specifically define.

Obviously, the refusal to be clear is due to the wish to avoid federal lawsuits; if one does not say the word “anti-LGBTQ” then facetiously, one’s actions against that community are not anti-LGBTQ. If one looks only at sexual content no matter its context, then clearly one would be distracted by the real target. On 15 July 2024, the APLS officially certified the admin code changes, which meant that every public library in the state had until the end of the fiscal year (October 2024) to draft policies that aligned with the code changes or would not receive state aid (Holmes, 17 July 2024). In October of 2023, APLS voted to remove its affiliation with the ALA in order to avoid having funding removed by the legislature (Holmes, 13 November 2023).

The Legislature Exacerbates the Issue

The worst of these offenses that have arisen out of the political and religious fervor of these extremist conservative actors is the passing of bills by state legislatures to criminalize the profession of librarianship. For example, during the 2023-2024 legislative session in Alabama, HB 385 made it all the way to the last day of session before finally being killed. Proposed by Rep. Arnold Mooney (R-Indian Springs), the bill would have removed the criminal exemption for librarians under Alabama’s Anti-Obscenity Enforcement Act, and according to J. Holmes of *APR*, included “a substitute brought by Rep. David Faulkner (R-Homewood) [that] creates a seven-day notice requirement before librarians could be arrested” (Holmes, 26 April 2024). Known as the “Jail Librarians” bill, it has since been brought back on the docket for the 2024-2025 legislative session.

Bills of a similar nature that either passed or were punted into the next session in either local or state legislatures includes two bills. The first bill, HB 425, extends library restrictions into university libraries, prevents libraries from joining the ALA, prohibits libraries from purchasing books with “sexual content” or gender ideology, and authorizes the attorney general and parents to take legal action if a violation occurs. Its nature is self-explanatory as to why religious extremists wanted that one in action. The second bill, SB 10, allows library board members to be removed by local governing authorities, which would make it legal for local leaders to remove any board member who does not agree with their censorship agenda. According to Summer Lopez of *Time Magazine* in an exposé article about how the book banning crusade has even extended into America’s book publishing industry, “Of course, book publishers and distributors aren’t putting pornography in schools. And it is already a federal crime to distribute obscene materials to minors, rendering these new bills unnecessary, if that were their goal. But these bills aren’t actually about obscene materials. They’re about giving book ban activists another way to advance their broad censorship crusade” (Lopez, 2023). These bills illustrate the extreme level of attack that this country’s books and their purveyors are currently experiencing.

The concept of instituting oppressive laws to police books is a result of galvanized efforts by conservative politicians for their potential voting blocs. According to Drs. Goncalves, Langrock, et al. of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States, who published an aca-

demic article in *PNAS Nexus* in July 2024, there is a deepening polarization of politics in regard to the recent book banning push:

“...we find that (i) banned books are disproportionately written by people of color and feature characters of color, both fictional and historical, in children’s books; (ii) right-leaning counties that have become less conservative over time are more likely to ban books than neighboring counties; and (iii) national and state levels of interest in books are largely unaffected after they are banned. *Together, these results suggest that rather than serving primarily as a censorship tactic, book banning in this recent US context, targeted at low-interest children’s books featuring diverse characters, is more similar to symbolic political action to galvanize shrinking voting blocs [emphasis mine]”* (Goncalves, et. al., 2024).

To the trained eye, religious extremism through the form of book bans is currently being used by conservative politicians in order to build this political galvanization wave in the US. When ignorance reigns, tools for learning and entertainment morph into tools for oppression. Alabama is one of the many examples of this.

In addition, these bills and other forms of political action are not unique to Alabama. Many libraries throughout the country experiencing the same political attacks are taking extreme measures in order to keep their doors open. This is especially true for small libraries that do not have the space to provide restrictions between children’s and adult books. For example, after Idaho’s state legislature passed the so-called “Children’s School and Library Protection Act” in early 2024, Donnelly Public Library in Donnelly, Idaho (a building of only 1,034 square feet) was forced to become “adults only” in order to comply, since it is too small to be able to separate the adult and children’s sections (The Authors Guild, 2024). How can bills such as these “protect” children when many libraries are forced to ban *children* in order to remain open?

Another example is the policy that some libraries are adopting that prevents children’s library cards from checking out any books from the adult section at all, whether the child has the parent’s permission to check out that book or not, and whether that book contains any sexual content or not (Jensen, 2023). For example, this would apply to those libraries whose classic books are only available in their original format and not the juvenile illustrated classic version. How would that work out in actuality? Could a child not just check out a book under an adult’s card, as happens so often already? The ability to ignore such simple caveats of religious extremism is ample proof that the extremists in power are not interested in actually protecting children, but in stirring the conservative fervor that affects the voting actions of many of their supporters, many of whom vote from a place of fear rather than a place of reason.

Hopeful Responses to Militant Advocacy Groups

Clean Up Alabama is a hate group acting as a spinoff of Moms for Liberty, a nationally recognized hate group that infiltrates school and public library boards across the country in order to push a Christian Nationalist agenda under the slogan “For the Children”. This relatively recent extremism has blinded many of its followers from seeing the necessity of freedom of expression, religious tolerance, and intellectual pursuit.

Amanda Jones, famed author of *That Librarian: The Fight Against Book Banning In America*, says it best when she interviewed for *Publisher's Weekly* in June 2024 to discuss her book and specifically to answer the question about who needs to read it:

“I hate to make it political, but I think moderate Republicans like my parents need to read this book, because book banning has been so politicized by the far right. Censorship should be a nonpartisan issue. All of us should be in favor of the freedom to read, but there are so many lies being spread about libraries by extremists and then amplified by well-meaning people who just believe things they see online” (Albanese, 2024).

In the same article, she further elaborates on the importance of libraries having diverse collections and why this current wave of book bans is so pernicious:

“They [the book challengers today] are targeting books by the hundreds written by, or about, the BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ communities, posting out-of-context passages from books on social media and calling it pornographic, and often misleading the public about where books are placed in the library, all to generate political outrage. And then those who stand up for the freedom to read, like me, are called groomers, and targeted and harassed” (Albanese, 2024).

Because of one group's blindsided fervor for religious intolerance, a faction of society is being “othered” through the books written by and about them, a concept that is not new worldwide. According to Sam Olson, a cofounder of RFA, “books are proxies for people” (Hayden, 2024). When books about people of color and the LGBTQIA+ community are banned from libraries, it is the same as saying that those people should be banned from public spaces too. On September 19, 2024, Alabama GOP chairman also became the chairman of the APLS board, proving that Alabama is now aligning its traditionally non-partisan public libraries with Republican politics (Holmes, 20 September 2024).

However, there is hope. According to their mission page, RFA is a local nonprofit group that is “dedicated to upholding the values of American democracy by fighting any censorship of our public libraries, and by advocating for inclusive library collections that accurately reflect the diversity of the communities they serve” (Read Freely Alabama, 2023). Founded in opposition to Clean Up Alabama, RFA actively supports Alabama's libraries, its librarians, LGBTQIA+ rights, intellectual freedom, First Amendment rights, the separation of church and state, DEI initiatives, and governmental transparency. Since May 2024, Read Freely Alabama has filed a federal lawsuit against the APPL board, in conjunction with ALLA and various Autauga County families (Roney, 2024).

A patron, who is a RFA member, started a GoFundMe page to raise money in response to our loss of income mere hours after the news broke that my coworkers and I were fired. EveryLibrary then began their own fundraiser and the two were eventually combined before dissemination to the affected librarians. Similarly, the ALLA presented awards of recognition to the fired librarians and since then has released its own Alabama Bill of Rights, in defiance to the APLS's self-removal of its subscription from the ALA and passing of the discriminatory code policies for statewide funding. Other Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC)

complaints have also been filed against the board in reference to wrongful terminations and the lack of accessibility for patrons with disabilities on the website.

Conclusion

The push to make religious extremism the law of the land is not a new concept. Politics has always been rife with candidates who care more for their own ideological preferences than they do for the people they represent. Religious extremists use library books as proxies for banning the rights of certain disenfranchised people. Alabama is part of a much bigger picture that is impacting public libraries across the nation. Equality for all does not mean that there is inferiority for some, and no more is that reality a fact than in a library. One public library in Alabama and its support groups know this fight for equality for all well enough, even if those who are bent towards religious extremism do not.

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